

FY-19 Texas Indigent Defense Grant
Williamson County Grant Summary

“Transformative Justice: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Indigent Defense”

Problem Statement - Please describe the issue or problem that the grant program will help improve.

To provide clients with meaningful representation, counsel must develop interdisciplinary approaches to advocacy that take their clients' full range of legal and social support needs into account. Law school, however, fails to prepare attorneys to interact across disciplines. With complex systems of care, a new model is needed that protects individual liberty and addresses underlying needs. Such a model is essential when working with justice-involved young adults, ages 17-24, who make up only 11% of Texans, yet they account for over 29% of arrests. Over 75% of justice-involved young adults recidivate, the highest short-term recidivism rate of any age group.

Objectives - Please describe the desired outcomes if the grant activities are implemented.

This program will achieve better outcomes for our clients, their families, and their communities. It combines aggressive legal advocacy with a broader recognition that for most poor people arrested and charged with a crime, the criminal case is not the only issue with which they struggle. We anticipate reducing recidivism and improving justice outcomes for young adults, enhancing public safety, and reducing costs to criminal justice systems. We will improve the health outcomes of our clients, including the maintenance of long-term mental health and substance use disorder recovery, and reduce their utilizations of more expensive healthcare delivery systems.

Activities - Please describe what specific actions need to be taken to solve the problem(s) above.

We will employ an innovative public health alternative to incarceration program for justice-involved emerging adults, ages 17-24, charged with a felony offense in the adult criminal justice system. In lieu of traditional adult court adjudication, participants will receive community-based services through a localized, integrated health and social services program structured to reduce participants' criminogenic risk. Advances in neurobiology and psychology on adolescent development will inform the goals, design, and operation of the program. Defense counsel will receive extensive training in best practices when working on interdisciplinary teams, providing developmentally appropriate responses to their clients, and engaging in problem-solving courts that protect individual liberty.

Evaluation - Please describe how the program's success will be evaluated.

We have partnered with the Lone Star Justice Alliance, who in partnership with the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University, Columbia Justice Lab, and the University of Texas School of Public Health's Health Science Center will design two evaluations of the program: 1) a multi-disciplinary outcome study, and 2) an implementation study. The outcome study will be a mixed methods program evaluation, including a randomized controlled trial (RCT), to evaluate the program's ability to improve participants' health and justice system outcomes and to assess the cost-effectiveness of the intervention.