

 Click to Print[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

# Help on the way for mentally ill defendants

AMERICAN-STATESMAN EDITORIAL

Wednesday, January 3, 2007

With the start of the new year, Travis County is poised to launch what is being called the nation's first stand-alone public defender's office dedicated to representing mentally ill defendants.

The new office aims to help poor mentally ill defendants charged with misdemeanors navigate the criminal justice system. That is not as easy as it sounds. Those defendants typically end up in jail, and then are returned to the streets without receiving the treatment they need to help them lead normal lives. It shouldn't surprise anyone that they end up back in jail, repeating the cycle again and again.

The legal system lacks the resources and expertise to address mentally ill defendants who break the law. We can and should do better, and that is where the Travis County Mental Health Public Defender's Office comes in.

The new system should handle indigent mentally ill defendants differently than what is being done now through court-appointed attorneys. That difference, experts say, could slow the revolving door.

Two lawyers would be dedicated to handling cases involving mentally ill defendants. They would be joined by social workers and support staff who would connect defendants to counseling, therapy and other community services. Oftentimes, those defendants get involved in crime — trespassing, public intoxication and shoplifting — after they've stopped taking their medication. The office would address that issue as well.

The revolving door is a significant problem for Travis County. About 15 percent of the county's jail population is made up of defendants with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, major depression or other mental illnesses.

There is strong debate about whether continuing to lock up those defendants is the best use of public tax dollars. In the long run, experts say, it is cheaper to treat them.

"The wonderful thing about this is not only would people get the legal help they need, but they would get help from caseworkers and social workers to help them get stabilized and keep them out of criminal justice system," said Rebecca Lightsey, executive director of Texas Appleseed, a public interest law center that focuses on legal matters affecting underserved Texans.

We applaud the Travis County Commissioners Court for obtaining a \$500,000 state grant to start up the new office. As we reported in May, the county expected to have the office up and running by November, but it

took longer to ensure that things were done right, County Judge Sam Biscoe said. The county is searching for a director to head the office, which is expected to open in 60 days, Biscoe said Tuesday.

The county will add \$125,000 in the first year to finance the office's \$625,000 annual budget. Each year after that, the state will reduce its portion by \$125,000 (and the county will increase its share by that amount) until the county fully finances the office in the fifth year.


County taxpayers won't inherit a new burden, though. Taxpayers pay for court-appointed lawyers to represent indigent defenders with mental illness, so those costs should offset expenses of a public defender's office, Biscoe said.

If the new office can help mentally ill defendants stay out of jail and get back on their feet, then that will benefit the community as a whole.

Vote for this story!

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.statesman.com/editorial/content/editorial/stories/archive/0103publicdefenderedit.html>

 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.