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NEWS RELEASE

HARRIS COUNTY REOPENS PART OF COURTHOUSE IN EFFORT TO EASE JAIL AND COURT CROWDING

*Progress on Harvey-Related Repairs
Could Speed Up Jail Processing By 20 Percent*

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett joined other county officials this morning to announce that parts of the downtown Criminal Justice Center, the county's primary criminal courthouse, would be reopened next month in an effort to reduce jail crowding and speed up the judicial process.

Four floors of the courthouse, which was severely damaged by Hurricane Harvey last year, will be reopened on June 4 for jail dockets, which include initial appearances and pending jail cases. Emmett said the county would reopen 14 courtrooms on the 17th-20th floors of the building – 12 for felonies and two for misdemeanors. There will be no trials at the building until more repairs are completed.

"County taxpayers have been spending nearly \$20,000 a day to send hundreds of jail inmates to other locations because damage from Hurricane Harvey left us unable to operate our courts as usual," said Emmett. "By reopening these courtrooms early, we are able to save money and, just as importantly, ensure that our courts can do their jobs more quickly and efficiently."

Repairs on the courthouse could cost at least \$70 million and likely will not be finished until next year. The reopening of the 14 courtrooms is expected to reduce congestion at the neighboring Civil Justice Center by an estimated 50 percent and boost the processing of in-custody criminal defendants by 20 percent.

Judge Vanessa Velasquez, the chief administrative judge for the criminal division, said this morning that she and the entire Harris County judiciary were "thrilled" that officials with the county's engineering and budget departments were able to devise a plan to reopen the courtrooms early.