



Date:
Contact:

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Joe Stinebaker
Communications Director
O) 713-755-4027
C) 713-503-2610
Joe.Stinebaker@cjo.hctx.net

NEWS RELEASE

JUDGE EMMETT APPLAUDS SEN. JOAN HUFFMAN ON PASSAGE OF JAIL DIVERSION BILL

*New Law Creates Program to Divert Mentally Ill from Jail,
Direct Them to Appropriate Medical and Social Services*

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett congratulated state Sen. Joan Huffman today on passage of Senate Bill 1185, Huffman's bill to allow Harris County to begin a unique pilot program aimed at diverting mentally ill residents away from the Harris County Jail and into appropriate medical and social programs for treatment.

Emmett also thanked state Rep. Senfronia Thompson for her work in shepherding the legislation through the state House of Representatives, saying Huffman's and Thompson's work went a long way to improving thousands of lives in Harris County.

"Sen. Huffman's bill is one of the most important pieces of legislation to come out of the Legislature this session," Emmett said. "It allows Harris County to save millions of dollars by implementing a program that seeks to treat, rather than punish, mental illness in our county. If this program is as successful as I expect it to be, it will surely serve as a model for the rest of the state, and perhaps the nation, in years to come."

Huffman, a recognized leader in the Senate on criminal justice issues, introduced the legislation to create the pilot program in Harris County, where the local jail has unintentionally become the state's largest mental health facility and home to hundreds of inmates diagnosed with mental illness. The new program would be implemented by county officials and the state Department of State Health Services. The state will contribute \$5 million a year to provide mentally ill inmates with medical, social and housing assistance before and after their release from jail. Harris County will provide \$5 million a year's worth of in-kind services. The program's effectiveness on recidivism will be monitored and the results presented to state officials by the end of 2016.

"Our hope is that we can break the cycle in which those with a mental illness are released from jail with no medication to control their illness, no housing and no support system – only to collide once again with law enforcement and our criminal justice system," Emmett said. "This is a far more humane, not to mention less expensive, way to treat our neighbors with mental illness."

Harris County officials have estimated that nearly 1,000 inmates cycled through the jail at least five times in the past two years, some as many as 30 times. Nearly 600 of those inmates had been diagnosed with a mental illness.