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THE HARRIS COUNTY CRIMINAL JUSTICE COORDINATING COUNCIL WINS MACARTHUR FOUNDATION SUPPORT TO EVALUATE USE OF ITS JAIL

Grant is part of MacArthur's $75 million Safety and Justice Challenge, which supports innovation in local criminal justice systems

HOUSTON – The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation today announced that the Harris County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) is one of 20 jurisdictions selected to receive a $150,000 grant to create a fairer, more effective local justice system. The grant is a part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, the Foundation's $75 million initiative to reduce over-incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. CJCC will use the grant to perform a data-driven analysis of its criminal justice system.

CJCC was chosen following a highly competitive selection process that drew applications from nearly 200 jurisdictions in 45 states. The Safety and Justice Challenge competition supports jurisdictions across the country seeking to create more just and effective local justice systems that improve public safety, save taxpayer money, and yield better outcomes. The 20 jurisdictions selected will work with expert consultants to develop a plan for local justice system improvement. In 2016, as many as 10 of these jurisdictions will receive a second round of funding – between $500,000 to $2 million annually – to implement their plans over two years.

"Nearly 200 diverse jurisdictions responded to our challenge, reflecting nationwide interest in reducing over-incarceration," said Julia Stasch, president of the MacArthur Foundation. "Each of the sites selected has demonstrated the motivation, collaboration, and commitment needed to make real change in their local justice systems. We hope their local efforts will model effective and safe alternatives to the incarceration status quo for the rest of the country."

Bill Jackson, Harris County's Chief Budget Officer, said the county jail is the largest in Texas and the third largest in the United States. In addition to the jail, which costs more than $650,000 per day to operate, taxpayer dollars fund other critical parts of the county's criminal justice system – including 37 criminal courts, the Sheriff's Office, the District Attorney's Office and indigent defense.

"Harris County is growing at a rate of 80,000 residents each year and it must be prepared to meet the challenges presented by this fast-growing population and thriving economy," Jackson said. "This is an exciting opportunity to evaluate our criminal justice system in a comprehensive way using data and criminal justice research. The CJCC members will look at everything – from arrest and release decisions, to case processing and diversion opportunities, to recidivism and re-entry initiatives – in order to ensure that we are making wise and effective use of our jail and criminal justice resources."

Despite growing national attention to the large number of Americans confined in state and federal prisons, significantly less attention has been paid to local justice systems, where the criminal justice system primarily operates and where over incarceration begins. Jail populations have more than tripled since the 1980s, as have cumulative expenditures related to building and running them. According to recent research from the Vera Institute of Justice, nearly 75 percent of the population of both sentenced offenders and pretrial detainees are in jail for nonviolent offenses such as traffic, property, drug or

public-order violations. Further, low-income individuals and communities of color disproportionately experience the negative consequences of incarceration.

In Harris County, mental health and homelessness contribute significantly to the jail population, particularly those repeatedly detained, often for minor crimes. The jail is widely regarded as the largest mental health hospital in the state with 25-30% of the daily jail population prescribed psychotropic medication, half of which are homeless. An additional 16% also have received homeless services in the community. From October 2012 to March 2015, 10,400 people were jailed three or more times. Of those, 3,625 were diagnosed with a mental illness and 4,339 had indicators for homelessness.

Substance abuse also is a major challenge. In 2014, 34% of charges filed were drug related. Also, 9,018 offenders were charged with low-level felony drug possession charges – 3,189 of these were repeat drug offenders. Many low-level drug offenders are sentenced to local or state jails, where they are released without supervision or treatment, often only to be re-arrested on a new drug charge.

Because Harris County is so large – with more than 100 law enforcement agencies, 113,000 annual jail bookings, and more than 106,000 criminal cases filed each year – data analysis is critical to understanding what is actually occurring within the criminal justice system. The CJCC hopes to use information gained in the course of the grant exercise to identify populations within its system that merit additional scrutiny; to review and, if necessary, improve critical points in its processes; to capitalize on criminal justice research regarding best practices in crafting responses; and to measure its progress toward articulated goals.