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NEW REPORT: EXPANDING HARRIS COUNTY'S SUCCESSFUL DRUG DIVERSION PROGRAM WILL FURTHER IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY OUTCOMES & SAVE TAXPAYER DOLLARS

Harris County is in a position to capitalize on the success of its First Chance Intervention Program for individuals with first-time marijuana possession offenses. Expanding diversion opportunities to those facing low-level theft and drug possession charges is a cheaper, more effective way to address drug crime in Harris County.

Houston, Texas—In October 2014, Harris County District Attorney Devon Anderson partnered with local law enforcement to establish the First Chance Intervention Program, a rehabilitative diversion program for individuals with first-time, Class B misdemeanor marijuana possession offenses. Today, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy released a report examining the First Chance Intervention Program and the potential societal, systemic, and financial benefits that would come with expanding the program to other offenses.

In *Second Chances: The Economic and Social Benefits of Expanding Drug Diversion Programs in Harris County*, TCJC and the Baker Institute examine the failures in drug policy that have spurred reform efforts across the country, emphasize the need for continued policy reform in Harris County, and highlight how the First Chance Intervention Program was a successful first step towards a cheaper, safer, more effective drug policy. *Second Chances* then outlines opportunities to expand Harris County's diversion programs beyond the successes of the First Chance Intervention Program and into other offenses, including low-level theft and drug possession arrests.

"TCJC commends Harris County District Attorney Devon Anderson for initiating the First Chance Intervention Program," said Jay Jenkins, TCJC Project Attorney in Harris County. "But at this point, it is critical for the County to expand its drug diversion programs and reform a bloated system that necessitates an overwhelming allocation of resources for arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating those charged with low-level, nonviolent theft and drug possession crimes." See Harris County expenses on this population below:

- \$216,250 per month on *booking fees alone* for misdemeanor marijuana arrests;
- \$111,900 *per day* incarcerating defendants *not yet convicted* on state jail felony charges, a large majority of which are the possession of less than one gram of a controlled substance; and
- An outlay of over \$1 million by local crime labs to accommodate a change in policy following a record number of exonerations for drug convictions in Harris County. Houston has become America's exoneration capitol, with *over 60% of United States drug crime exonerees since 2012 being Harris County defendants who plead guilty.*

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TCJC and the Baker Institute make several recommendations to Harris County stakeholders to expedite an expansion of the First Chance Intervention Program and develop new drug diversion programs, including:

- The compilation of criminal justice, public health, and population data for a comprehensive analysis of drug use and abuse among Harris County residents;
- An evaluation of substance abuse treatment providers to ascertain if there is more need for accessible, affordable treatment options as an alternative to treatment through incarceration;
- A statistical analysis of the impact of drug laws on Harris County's economy and public safety;
- An expansion of the First Chance Intervention Program to all law enforcement agencies, and the formation of a committee to gather and analyze the data necessary to offer the program to a greater number of individuals;
- An exploration into the feasibility of instituting a pilot expansion of the First Chance Intervention Program to all marijuana offenses and first-time misdemeanor theft offenses; and
- An exploration of pretrial diversion options for defendants charged with felony possession of less than one gram of a controlled substance, including development of a diversion docket, reduced bail in such cases, and increased reliance on probation for those found guilty.

For the new report from TCJC and the Baker Institute, *Second Chances: The Economic and Social Benefits of Expanding Drug Diversion Programs in Harris County*, please visit this page:

<http://tinyurl.com/SecondChancesHarrisCounty>.

For more information about Harris County's First Chance Intervention Program, please visit this page:

<http://app.dao.hctx.net/OurOffice/FirstChanceIntervention.aspx>.

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TCJC works with peers, policy-makers, practitioners, and community members to identify and promote smart justice policies that safely reduce Texas' costly over-reliance on incarceration – creating stronger families, less taxpayer waste, and safer communities.