



Ed Housewright: Collin County has cut spending on legal defense for the poor

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By ED HOUSEWRIGHT / The Dallas Morning News
ehousewright@dallasnews.com Reach Ed Housewright at 469-330-5624.

Every other week, Ed Housewright will write about news out of Collin County and Allen. This week, he looks at county spending.

A defense expense is cut

Collin County commissioners pride themselves on saving money.

The latest example involves indigent defense spending. Commissioners recently learned the county spent \$800,000 less on lawyers for the poor last year than in 2006.

Expenditures dropped about 15 percent to \$4 million, even though the number of cases rose 2.7 percent. Why has spending dropped? Commissioners say the poor aren't denied free representation. Instead, officials are more carefully screening defendants who claim to be indigent.

Commissioners began enforcing strict eligibility guidelines after indigent defense costs rose 31 percent between fiscal 2002 and fiscal 2005.

Now databases are used to verify defendants' income and assets. To be eligible for a court-appointed attorney, a defendant must have less than \$2,500 in assets, not including the value of his or her primary care. The accused can't earn more than 125 percent of the federal poverty level. For a single person, that translates into a maximum annual income of \$10,210.

The crackdown is paying off. In fiscal 2006, indigent defense costs fell 10 percent, records show.

Judges emphasize that even if a person doesn't meet the income or asset guidelines, he or she can be granted a lawyer. Judges say deserving people are not denied attorneys.

No one has complained about the new rules – at least not loudly. Poor people accused of crimes don't have much of a voice anyway.

The county also is cutting spending by reducing fees paid to court-appointed attorneys.

Attorneys have griped that the new fee structure isn't fair. They say they're working too hard for too little money.

But no one seems to be listening.

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