

Proposal Narrative - Improving Criminal Justice Response in Domestic Violence Project

The Fort Bend County Improving Criminal Justice Response to Domestic Violence Project seeks \$1,000,335 in funding through the OVW ICJR Program with the potential to significantly improve the lives of over 822,779 residents. The expansion of the specialized Domestic Violence Division, including the hiring of a full-time attorney and a social worker, is a crucial step towards increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the judicial system in Fort Bend County. This project targets a geographical area of over 880 square miles (more than half the size of Rhode Island) with a diverse and growing population. A recent study from the University of Texas at San Antonio, Texas, shows a 6.8% population increase to 878,774 residents between 2020 and 2022.

The county includes diverse and underserved communities, such as Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino populations, recent immigrants, individuals with limited English proficiency, older adults, and people with disabilities. Our project, as evidenced by recent data compiled by Understanding Houston, is crucial in addressing the needs of these communities. Fort Bend County is a highly diverse community, comprising approximately 30% White (not Hispanic or Latino), 22% African American, and 22% Asian. Approximately 25% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, the most significant growing minority in the area. Lending to its rich diversity, more than 25% of residents are foreign-born, coming from Asia (50%), Latin America (37%), Africa (5%), and Europe (2%), with 40% of the population speaking a language other than English in their home. Fort Bend County boasts a higher-than-average median household income, with a poverty level of less than 8%, according to the 2022 American Community Survey.

Unfortunately, income disparities are not easily visible, as Lamar Consolidated Independent School District (LCISD), one of the largest school districts in the county, has over 50% of its campuses designated as Title I Schools, with 59% of elementary campuses designated as Title I Schools. The communities served in Fort Bend include the county's largest city, Sugar Land, with over 88,000 residents, followed by Katy, Missouri City, Rosenberg, Richmond, and Stafford. However, with no

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zoning regulations for areas outside city limits, at least two-thirds of Fort Bend County remains unincorporated, leaving it with little regulation.

The rapid population growth has led to a significant increase in intimate partner violence and sexual violence, creating an urgent need for intervention. In 2023, local law enforcement referred approximately 2,816 new cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking to the DA's office, a 22% increase over the previous year. In 2023, law enforcement referred 5,456 cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking to the district attorney's office. This number reflects a compared to 4,737 in 2022.

Unfortunately, the increase in the number of domestic violence cases has become a significant challenge in Fort Bend County. The growth in case numbers mirrors similar population growth rates as before the COVID-19 pandemic; the Fort Bend County District Attorney's office saw, on average, less than a 5% increase in the number of cases referred year after year. However, in 2020, during the height of the pandemic, approximately 2,500 new cases were referred for prosecution, representing an 8.8% increase compared to previous years. This drastic increase has stretched the resources of the Domestic Violence Division to capacity, underscoring the urgent need for additional funding.

The Domestic Violence Unit conducts a preliminary screening of applicants for protective orders. Upon passing this initial inquiry, the applicant meets with a prosecutor, who then handles the case from the intake stage through filing and until disposition. Currently, there are three prosecutors to cover six courts. These prosecutors represent the state's interest in both misdemeanor and felony family violence-related cases with charges ranging from aggravated assault to capital murder. In addition, prosecutors within the division meet with victims to assist with filing the order and representing the state's interest in court on domestic violence cases where there is no arrest made yet.

Rapid population growth in Fort Bend County over the past few years has necessitated an increase in the number of law enforcement officers, investigators, prosecutors, judges, and available courts to address the growing number of cases and the subsequent victims of crime. This population

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growth has been accompanied by an increase in specific cases requiring specialized teams of investigators and prosecutors to address, such as domestic violence and sexual assault. In the 2022 fiscal year, the Fort Bend County District Attorney Domestic Violence Division received more than 2,473 case referrals for domestic violence-related cases, representing a 12% increase compared to 2,200 in 2021, and on average, each prosecutor maintains a caseload of approximately 200 active cases on top of any protective order cases they are assigned.

In 2023, the Domestic Violence division received over 1,800 calls from victims requesting assistance with filing a protective order against their abuser. Out of those calls, prosecutors and investigators interviewed 886 domestic violence victims to review information related to their cases to see if the victim's complaint rises to the level of offense required for filing a protective order. In 2023, 45 protective orders were filed through our office, accompanied by 66 hearing resets, indicating that each case may require multiple court appearances before a decision is made on whether to grant the order. This number does not include protective orders filed by outside counsel on behalf of victims. The most complex cases for prosecutors are domestic homicide cases.

In 2019, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office disposed of three domestic violence homicide cases, with only six domestic violence homicide cases disposed of between 2019 and 2021. However, in 2022, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's office disposed of 15 domestic homicide cases, including 11 convictions. There is also a disturbing trend in the number of domestic violence homicide cases. In 2019, the DA's office disposed of three cases, and a total of six cases were disposed of between 2019 and 2021. However, in 2022, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's office disposed of 15 domestic homicide cases resulting in 11 convictions. This rate is an increase of over 85% in comparison to the combined total number of domestic homicide cases between 2019 through 2021.

This application addresses the following purpose areas: (1) strengthening the criminal justice response to domestic and sexual violence to expand its specialized Domestic Violence Division to hire a full-time attorney and a social worker to increase efficiency and effective operation of judicial system in

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Fort Bend County and (2) enhancing multidisciplinary collaboration with law enforcement and community-based victim services through partnerships with local victim service providers such as Fort Bend Women's Center and Daya Houston for on-site counseling, and the Texas Forensic Nurse Examiners for multidisciplinary Forensic Service Center for medical exams and adult interviews and (3) improving access to protection orders and trauma-informed legal support through the addition of an experienced domestic violence prosecutor and a social worker experienced in working with victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking.

Through grant funding from the ICJR program, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office will expand its specialized Domestic Violence Division by hiring a full-time attorney and a social worker, aiming to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the judicial system in Fort Bend County. The attorney will serve as a criminal prosecutor on behalf of the State of Texas, focusing on case intake by conducting assessments for misdemeanor and felony cases referred by local law enforcement, as well as filing protective orders. The social worker services victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking by conducting intake assessments and providing case management, psychosocial and/or information, and referral assistance to community partners. The Social Worker will serve as a navigator through the prosecution process as their case moves through the criminal justice system. A social worker will interview victims who decide to withdraw their cases to understand all the options and resources available to them before signing an Affidavit of Non-Prosecution, which allows the prosecutor to withdraw the case and not continue pursuing charges against the suspect.

With Fort Bend's population surpassing 878,000 and a 22% increase in violence-related referrals in 2023, this project meets the urgent demand for specialized, survivor-centered prosecution and services. The primary challenges this project addresses include (1) providing resources through supporting an additional prosecutor to evaluate incoming cases from law enforcement in a timely manner, (2) redistributing the caseload of each prosecutor by eliminating the backlog of 50-60 cases per prosecutor in the Domestic Violence Division thereby increasing case clearance and prosecution rates, and (3)

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providing consistent support and follow-up for victims through a social worker specializing in working with victims of domestic violence who either decline to prosecute or wish to push forward protective order.

With general felony prosecutors averaging 283 cases and domestic violence prosecutors juggling 200+ active cases, victims experience delayed responses and gaps in communication, putting them at risk of being victimized again before the initial incident is investigated. These delayed responses in domestic violence cases are typically the result of a domestic violence incident where the suspect has fled the scene. When this occurs, prosecutors work with investigators to locate the suspect, where they can be arrested or notified of any existing protective orders. However, many suspects go to great lengths to avoid detection, which makes the timely processing of cases, including locating suspects, a public safety issue, as the suspect may commit a second offense before the first is processed. Plus, the overwhelming number of intake cases is very detrimental to morale across the division as the backlog makes it difficult for prosecutors to successfully resolve cases to the benefit of domestic violence victims and the general public. The addition of a trauma-informed domestic violence prosecutor allows the office to respond more effectively to victim needs and to handle high-risk cases that would otherwise become inactive, closed, or declined for prosecution. It complements existing shelter, advocacy, and investigative services through coordinated action. This initiative does not duplicate existing services; rather, it enhances coordination, expertise, and specialized attention within the Domestic Violence Division.

The goals of the Improving Criminal Justice Response in Domestic Violence Project are (1) strengthening the criminal justice response to domestic and sexual violence, (2) enhancing multidisciplinary collaboration with law enforcement and community-based victim services, and (3) improving access to protection orders and trauma-informed legal support. Fort Bend County requests priority consideration under ICJR Statutory Priority Area #2 as an applicant who demonstrates a commitment to vigorous enforcement of laws and prosecution of cases involving domestic violence,

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dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, including the enforcement of protection orders from other states and jurisdictions, including Tribal jurisdictions.

The proposed project aims to address the growing need for trauma-informed, specialized prosecution of domestic violence and adult sexual assault cases in Fort Bend County through the addition of a specialized domestic violence prosecutor focused on evaluating incoming cases referred to the District Attorney's office by local law enforcement and provide critical support for victims seeking protective orders. In addition, a specialized domestic violence prosecutor focused on case intake can more readily identify arrest and investigation issues with law enforcement in handling domestic violence cases and provide additional training to law enforcement to improve the quality of cases presented for prosecution.

To achieve these goals, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office will retain a full-time domestic violence prosecutor with trauma-informed training focusing on case intake to assess and reduce the number of pending intake cases in the Domestic Violence Division. Supporting objectives are to conduct an evaluation and assessment of the number of pending intake cases to identify trends in arrests and investigations, obtain statistics on the number of intake cases where the suspect has committed a second offense, and develop training for judges and law enforcement to increase case clearance and conviction rates for domestic violence cases. The project will work to increase victim engagement and access to protection by retaining a full-time social worker experienced in working with domestic violence victims to assist them with accessing resources and identifying options available to them should they decide to sign an Affidavit of Non-Prosecution to decline to prosecute the offender. The project will also expand the use of the Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP) to improve access to protective orders by enhancing collaboration with law enforcement, maintaining more frequent communication with victims, and assisting victims in navigating the criminal justice system.

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office will measure the success of the project by tracking a variety of prescribed metrics, including the number of cases reviewed and accepted for

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prosecution, the number of cases successfully indicted by the grand jury, the number of protective orders filed and granted, and the number of cases resulting in convictions, deferred adjudication, probation, or community service as well as those cases that were closed due to the victim being unwilling or unable to continue with prosecution. The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office makes proposed services accessible to people with disabilities, people with limited English proficiency, and people who are Deaf or hard of hearing through partnerships with interpreter services, ensuring courtrooms and intake rooms are ADA-compliant, provide options for victims with transportation or mobility issues through the use of Zoom/Webex for remote participation, and continue to obtain survivor-led evaluations to gather input for continuous improvement.

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office will implement a 36-month timeline. For months 1-3, activities will be centered around new staff onboarding, training, coordination with internal staff and community partners, and assessing intake trends and needs. Months 4-12 will consist of evaluating case intake, law enforcement practices, and quarterly reporting. Lastly, months 13-36 will primarily consist of continuous evaluation of ongoing operations, reviewing data trends to identify needs, continuous community outreach, periodic program evaluation, and quarterly reporting.

The Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office represents the State of Texas in criminal prosecutions for crimes in Fort Bend County. We have 172 employees, comprising 89 attorneys, 21 investigators, and 62 support staff. The Domestic Violence Division shall consist of eight assistant district attorneys, three investigators, three full-time protective order clerks, and a chief prosecutor. Having dedicated investigators as well as a senior and more seasoned prosecutor assists the division in having more successful prosecution of domestic violence cases as well as success in seeking protective orders for victims. The Division Chief Prosecutor is a faculty member of the University of Houston School of Law's Blakely Advocacy Institute and has been a licensed attorney for over 25 years with a passion for teaching police officers and new attorneys.

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Support is provided from within the office through victim assistance coordinators, investigators, and staff, as well as from outside the office through our collaborative partnerships with the Fort Bend County Women's Center, the primary sexual assault service provider and the only domestic violence shelter in Fort Bend County. They support our efforts to secure this specialized position, and we are all hopeful that such a position will help close the gap between reporting and services. The primary duty of the Fort Bend County District Attorney and his assistants is not to convict but to see that justice is done. The District Attorney's Office will relentlessly pursue justice and utilize best practices in evidence-based prosecutions. The District Attorney's Office will ensure public safety with integrity, accountability, collaboration, and fairness.

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Executive Summary

The Fort Bend County Improving Criminal Justice Response to Domestic Violence Project seeks \$1,000,335 in funding through the OVW ICJR Program to expand its specialized Domestic Violence Division by hiring a full-time attorney and a social worker. This will increase judicial efficiency and effectiveness in Fort Bend County, a growing and diverse area covering over 880 square miles with a population exceeding 878,000. The county includes underserved communities: Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, immigrants, individuals with limited English proficiency, older adults, and people with disabilities. More than 25% are foreign-born; over 40% speak a language other than English at home. While the county has a high median income, income disparity exists—59% of LCISD elementary campuses are Title I.

The project addresses:

- Rapid population growth correlating with increased intimate partner violence, stalking, and sexual assault.
- In 2023, law enforcement referred 5,456 related cases—a 22% increase over 2022.
- Domestic Violence Division overwhelmed: 3 prosecutors handle 6 courts and 200+ cases each.
- Victims face delays; case backlogs impair justice and increase re-victimization risk.
- Increase in domestic homicides: 15 cases disposed of in 2022 vs. 6 from 2019–2021.

Purpose Areas:

- Strengthening criminal justice response to domestic and sexual violence.
- Enhancing multidisciplinary collaboration.
- Improving access to protection orders and trauma-informed legal support.

The proposal complements existing services by enhancing coordination with Fort Bend Women’s Center, Daya Houston, and the Texas Forensic Nurse Examiners. It does not duplicate existing services but fills critical staffing and expertise gaps.

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Project Approach:

- The new prosecutor will manage case intake and identify law enforcement issues.
- The social worker will provide trauma-informed support, assist victims withdrawing from prosecution, and help navigate protective orders.
- Together, they will reduce backlog, improve victim communication, and increase case resolution.

Goals, Objectives & Activities:

- Strengthen criminal justice response: hire a trauma-informed prosecutor.
- Enhance collaboration: coordinate with law enforcement and victim service agencies.
- Improve protective order access: deploy social worker support and expand LAP.

Tracking and Metrics:

- Cases reviewed/accepted/indicted.
- Protective orders filed/granted.
- Convictions, deferred outcomes, case closures due to victim withdrawal.

Timeline (36 Months):

- Months 1–3: Hiring, training, coordination.
- Months 4–12: Case intake evaluation, quarterly reporting.
- Months 13–36: Outreach, continued operations, evaluations.

Deliverables:

- Protective order guide (brochure or handout).
- Training curriculum for law enforcement and prosecutors.
- Quarterly evaluation reports.
- Outreach materials for community awareness.

Ensuring Accessibility:

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- ADA-compliant facilities.
- Interpreter services.
- Remote access via Zoom/Webex.
- Survivor-led feedback for service improvements.

Personnel & Partnerships:

- Key personnel: 89 attorneys, 21 investigators, 62 staff. DV Division has 8 ADAs, 3 investigators, 3 clerks, 1 deputy chief prosecutor, 1 chief prosecutor.
- Chief prosecutor is a 25-year veteran and faculty member at UH Blakely Advocacy Institute.
- Partners: Fort Bend Women's Center (DV shelter), Daya Houston (immigrant support), Texas Forensic Nurse Examiners.

Implementation Roles:

- Prosecutor: intake review, law enforcement training, protective orders.
- Social Worker: victim support, navigation, outreach.
- Partners: shelter, counseling, forensic services.

This integrated team will reduce risk of victims being victimized, reduce additional complex trauma, improve prosecution outcomes, and expand survivor access to justice.

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Domestic Violence Division – Intake Statistics

	Felony Intake Received	Felony Accepted Intake	Felony Rejected Intake	Felony Unadj Intake	Misd Intake Received	Misd Accepted Intake	Misd Rejected Intake	Misd Unadj Intake
Feb-24	59	38	25	16	98	67	51	10
Mar-24	52	29	17	13	89	71	26	5
Apr-24	57	27	18	4	125	30	21	3
May-24	75	55	52	14	131	15	15	2
Jun-24	61	43	31	16	109	38	22	7
Jul-24	64	42	25	8	173	19	22	5
Aug-24	84	30	28	6	135	21	20	
Sep-24	60	41	17	11	146	23	24	1
Oct-24	57	29	26	10	128	32	53	3
Nov-24	66	43	31	15	124	23	46	9
Dec-24	75	68	57	13	131	15	20	8
Jan-25	69	33	47	13	129	3	3	1
Feb-25	60	30	41	19	121	13	23	9
Mar-25	71	35	30	15	105	24	23	5
Apr-25	55	19	35	10	108	22	24	
May-25	49	45	38	29	115	32	35	6
Total	1014	607	518	212	1967	448	428	74

**Misd Total
 Disposed 990
 Fel Total Disposed 1337**

**Misd Percentage
 Disposed 50.33045247
 Fel Percentage
 Disposed 131.8540434**

**Sherry's disposed
 cases 73
 DV Cases Given to
 Everyone 40
 Total 113**

**Total Cases
 Received 2981
 Total Disposed 2327
 Total Percentage
 Disposed 78.06105334**

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Supporting Research and Citations

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