



## News Release

# Joan Huffman

## State Senator ★ District 17

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Huffman Announces Legislation to Create Mental Health Jail Diversion Pilot Program in Harris County**

AUSTIN—Senator Joan Huffman, R-Houston, today filed legislation to address the rise in the number of nonviolent people with mental illness in Texas jails. Specifically, Senate Bill 1185 creates a pilot program to reduce recidivism of individuals with serious mental illness in the Harris County Jail, which is regarded as the state’s largest mental health facility. On any given day, 25 percent of the inmates receive psychotropic medication. Hundreds of inmates with mental problems cycled in and out of Harris County jail five or more times from 2011 to 2012.

“Keeping nonviolent people with mental health issues out of our jails is the fiscally and socially responsible thing to do,” said Huffman. “It costs around \$137 per day to keep someone behind bars as opposed to \$12 per day for community mental health services. The majority of these individuals in the Harris County Jail never received the services they needed—services that probably would have kept them out of jail in the first place.”

The multi-year pilot program is designed to substantially reduce recidivism by incorporating a comprehensive array of clinical and social support services—easy access to mental health care, chemical dependence services, rehabilitation, and residential housing opportunities. A major benefit of the program is that it takes advantage of Harris County best practices and piggybacks

onto existing resources such as crisis intervention and response teams, along with jail-based mental health services.

“As a former prosecutor and judge, I’ve witnessed many stories of heartache involving families with mentally ill loved ones,” Huffman said. “It’s time we erased the stigma of mental illness. It is a medical problem that can be treated by proper care and medicine.”

The goal of the pilot project is to develop a criminal justice-mental health service model that not only reduces recidivism but can be replicated in all of the state’s metropolitan areas—at a substantial cost savings to Texas counties, cities and taxpayers. Huffman said the program “has the potential to make the entire nation take notice.”

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett applauded Huffman’s legislation.

"The Harris County Jail has become the state's largest mental health institution because too many people with mental illness end up in the criminal justice system rather than receiving proper health care," Judge Emmett said. "Sen. Huffman and her legislative colleagues are taking steps to remedy the situation. The result will be better outcomes for those with mental illness, lower costs for county taxpayers and an overall better society."

*Senator Joan Huffman represents District 17, which comprises Brazoria, Fort Bend and Harris counties. Huffman currently serves as chairwoman of the Texas Senate Republican Caucus and as vice chairwoman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee. She is a member of the Finance, State Affairs, and Health and Human Services Committees, as well as the Sunset Advisory Commission. Huffman and her family reside in Houston.*

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