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Fort Bend County Program Aims to Expand Services for Incarcerated Parents and Their Minor Children

(FORT BEND, TX) - Fort Bend County (FBC) Judge KP George along with FBC Sheriff Eric Fagan, and FBC Director of Behavioral Health Services Dr. Connie Almeida, today announced a new program designed to support the minor children of parents who are currently incarcerated in Fort Bend County thanks to a collaboration between the Department of Behavioral Services and the Sheriff's Office, through a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice.

FBC Behavioral Health Services' Always Parenting Program, is designed to provide support and resources to the FBC jail to create child-friendly spaces for visits and family-focused services, enhance safety protocols and procedures for visiting children, and develop a coordinated system of family-focused services that support the needs of incarcerated parents and their children. Additionally, the program intends to reduce the adverse effects of incarceration by strengthening parent-child relationships, addressing social determinants of health, and supporting re-entry and positive family reunification.

"Last Tuesday, Commissioner's Court approved the acceptance of grant funds from the Department of Justice (DOJ) Office. This is so important when you think about the number of how many incarcerated parents' children live in the county," said Judge George. "By offering a program that will allow parents the chance to serve their sentences and still spend time with their children, we help to maintain the family structure. The children have done nothing wrong, and where we can help, we should."

The Always Parenting Program is made possible by grant funds from the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Office of Justice Programs (OJP) Second Chance Act, addressing the needs of incarcerated parents and their minor children for the fiscal year 2022. The amount of the grant is \$741,460, with no match required by Fort Bend County, for the period of October 1, 2022, through September 30, 2025.

Preliminary data from FBC jail indicates that in 2019, nearly 44% (n = 5,341) of individuals booked into FBC jail had minor children. The Program aims to coordinate a protocol to identify the needs of incarcerated parents with minor children and the needs of their children, and further

established policies for visitation in FBC jail to increase the opportunities for engagement, play, and mutual learning between incarcerated parents and children.

Working alongside FBC Behavioral Services is Dr. Robin Gearing from the University of Houston's Graduate School of Social Work in Fort Bend County. The development and deployment of Always Parenting will be accomplished in two phases.

The initial phase focuses on planning activities needed to implement an evidence-based coordinated system for the provision of programs and services that support the needs of incarcerated parents and their children. An advisory group and subcommittees comprised of key agency and community stakeholders will develop and implement sustainable components addressing: (1) Identifying needs and targeting services (e.g., screening/assessment tools specific to parenting); (2) Creating supportive and safe visiting protocol and procedures (e.g., child-friendly and safe visitation rooms, Visit Coaching, virtual visits); (3) Developing staff/core personnel training (e.g., Mental Health First Aid, Trust-based Relational Intervention).

The subsequent implementation phase focuses on executing these plans to institute a countywide, a cross-system collaborative approach to improve responsiveness to needs and outcomes for incarcerated parents and their children in FBC.

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