



For Immediate Release

SECOND-CHANCE PROGRAM DEVELOPED BY MISDEMEANOR COURTS TO HELP NON-VIOLENT MISDEMEANOR OFFENDERS CHANGE COURSE

Fresh Start program and resource fair scheduled for April 9 as part of larger community restorative justice initiative

March 31, 2022 — Harris County misdemeanor court judges next month will launch a second-chance program helping eligible individuals seal their criminal records after successfully completing deferred adjudication for select non-violent misdemeanor offenses.

The Fresh Start program is designed to bring the court to the community in an effort to promote opportunities for restorative justice.

Under Fresh Start, judges grant orders of non-disclosure to individuals who qualify under state law. With such an order, the charge doesn't have to be disclosed publicly — on job applications, for example — but can still be viewed by criminal justice agencies.

Offered in partnership with the Harris County Community Supervision and Corrections Department and the Harris County Public Defender's Office, the program aims to make it easier for low-level offenders to course correct and change their path after experiences with the criminal justice system. That course correction, the judges explain, benefits not just the individual, but the entire community.

"You can hold people accountable and focus on rehabilitation simultaneously without compromising the safety of the community," said Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 9 Judge Toria Finch, presiding judge for the 16 Harris County misdemeanor courts. "We want people who come before us to be successful and productive members of society, which benefits the community. This is one way to keep our community safe."

Fresh Start is the inaugural program offered under BAYOU City Community Court, an umbrella initiative developed by the judges to encompass their efforts related to compassionate, restorative justice and community empowerment. BAYOU serves as an acronym for their mission — Bringing Assistance to You with Outreach and Understanding.

The initiative builds upon the judges' restorative approach to criminal justice, which aims to identify and address root causes of crime, hopefully breaking the cycle of incarceration and making the community safer in the process.

The work of the community court — which includes all 16 misdemeanor court judges — will focus on rehabilitative justice, as well as community education, outreach, and service. Though still in development, judges said the initiative eventually could offer new specialty courts, community forums and partnerships, externships, and a student mock trial program.

"We believe it's important for judges to be involved in the communities in which they serve," Judge Finch said. "The more engaged we are in the community, the more chances we have to educate people about the judicial process and foster faith in the criminal justice system."



FRESH START RESOURCE FAIR

April 9, 2022, 10 a.m. to Noon
Yet Center, 4900 Providence St.

- Houston Community College Adult Education & Literacy Program
- Houston Health Department Programs
 - Mobile Vaccine Clinic
 - My Brother's Keeper Redirect
 - Community Re-Entry Network
- Houston Food Bank Training
 - Community Warehouse & Logistics with Forklift Certification
 - Community Kitchen with Food Handler's Certification
- Workforce Solutions
- Goodwill Houston
- Impact Houston & Work Faith

The inaugural Fresh Start program and resource fair are scheduled for Saturday, April 9, 2022, from 10 a.m. to noon. Fresh Start will include judicial opening remarks and the signing of orders of nondisclosure for select individuals who have undergone prescreening to verify eligibility.

The fair is open to the public and features access to various community services, including adult education and workforce training and placement programs, counseling and coaching, job readiness, and career development, as well as a mobile vaccination clinic offering free flu shots and COVID-19 vaccinations and boosters.

The program will be held at the same time on the second Saturday of each month at rotating locations. To be considered for Fresh Start, stop by the fair to sign up for free prescreening or contact the Harris County Public Defender's Office at 713-274-6700.

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