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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 30, 2006

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TRLA SIGNS CONTRACT TO OPERATE FIRST REGIONAL PUBLIC DEFENDER OFFICE IN TEXAS

State indigent task force makes \$1.2 million available to establish model regional public defender program designed to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of indigent defense operations

DEL RIO, Texas – To help ensure that indigent persons charged with crime in rural Texas counties have adequate access to counsel, Val Verde County and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid signed a contract today to operate and staff the state’s first regional public defender office.

The Val Verde County Regional Public Defender office, supported with \$1.2 million over four years from the Texas Task Force on Indigent Defense, will begin full operations May 1st. In its first year, \$470,000 in state funding and \$117,000 in county funding will be used to start the office. Edwards, Kinney, and Terrell counties adjoin Val Verde, all of which are eligible to access Regional Public Defender services.

“This is probably the most important project we’ve ever done to date,” said Bryan Wilson, grants administrator for the Task Force on Indigent Defense. “A non-profit corporation working with the county to provide indigent defense services, as far as we can find, it’s never been done.”

Only five of Texas’s 254 counties currently have public defender offices, and no Texas county is currently served by a regional public defender. The Texas Comptroller, the state indigent defense taskforce, and most other states have concluded that public defender offices – which focus exclusively on representing indigent criminal defendants – can offer higher quality representation for less money than systems under which private lawyers are appointed to represent defendants on a case-by-case basis.

The Regional Public Defender office will provide a prompt interview and all necessary legal representation to defendants in all felony, misdemeanor, juvenile, and appellate cases through trial and direct appeal.

“Public defender offices make sense for the same reasons that lawyers join together in big civil law firms,” said TRLA Executive Director David Hall. “They share not only secretaries and libraries, but they share ideas and experience, which are critical to the efficient and effective delivery of all legal services to all persons, civil and criminal, rich and poor alike.”

Since passage of the Texas Fair Defense Act in 2001, indigent defense spending has risen statewide about 53 percent – from \$91.5 million to \$140.2 million. The state has covered roughly \$15 million of the annual increase, with counties picking up the rest of the tab. In Val Verde County alone, indigent defense spending has increased over 83 percent since passage of the Fair Defense Act – from \$176,000 to \$323,000 per year.

Caseload trends over the past five years indicate that in the first 12 months, defendants may be expected to qualify for services in 315 felony, 940 misdemeanor, 60 juvenile, and 10 appellate cases.

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The RPD program will be staffed by one Chief Public Defender, one First Assistant Public Defender, three staff attorneys, two investigators, and one secretary. The program will not represent clients in death penalty cases or in cases where a conflict of interest exists.

Established in 1970, TRLA is a nonprofit organization that provides free legal services to low-income and disadvantaged clients in a 68-county service area that covers the southwestern third of the state, including the entire Texas-Mexico border region. TRLA's mission is to promote the dignity, self-sufficiency, safety and stability of low-income Texans by providing high quality legal services and related educational services.