

**Sunday**

**A voice for the poor in court**

By **BRIAN ROGERS**  
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James Nielsen Houston Chronicle

Alex Bunin has been hired to helm Harris County's first public defender's office. He hopes to expand the caseload in two years.

*Alex Bunin, hired to create Harris County's first public defender office, will begin working with his staff to represent mentally ill defendants facing misdemeanor charges and appeals cases for the indigent by February. Bunin, 51, has created federal public defender offices in Alabama, Vermont and New York and expects the Harris County agency to expand its caseload to include juvenile and felony cases within two years. Suspects in Houston too poor to hire a lawyer historically have had court-appointed attorneys. The public defender office is a pilot project funded for the next four years in part by grant money, after which Commissioners Court can decide to continue it, expand it or close it. Bunin spoke to the Chronicle's Brian Rogers about the challenges of setting up a new office:*

**Q: Tell me about the scope of the office.**

A: It depends on the amount of cases we are assigned and how many we can handle. It's going to take a "feeling out" process with the courts, getting them comfortable with our representation. Right now, I'm going to be able to get a sense of how the **mental health** cases and the appeals go. Later this year, we hope to move on to felonies.

**Q: "Frequent flier" is a courthouse term that describes a defendant with a mental health condition who repeatedly cycles through the system. Those will be your first clients, right?**

A: Yes, we're going to be working very closely with MHMRA (Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority) getting those people treatment plans and seeking social services for them. We'll be doing more follow-up and tracking than assigned counsel can do. The more you can take care of them, the less likely they are going to end up in the criminal justice system.

**Q: And what will your budget be?**

A: The grant is for \$4,150,545. That will be our entire budget for the first year. The second year, the grant pays 80 percent. For the next two years, the grant will pay 20 percent and the county will pay 80 percent. After four years, the county will be paying the whole tab.

**Q: You don't know if the office is going to save taxpayer dollars for attorneys per case, but you say it will be a better value for the money spent?**

A: Absolutely. If you're asking me to give you a dollar figure that says it's going to save this amount of money, I can't tell you that. But we think we're going to do it in a more efficient manner and provide better representation.

**Q: Why is that?**

A: You're going to have lawyers who have access to the assistance of other lawyers and investigators on a round-the-clock basis. You're

just going to have a greater body of knowledge and assistance.

**Q: But the hope is that it will save the county money, especially in jail beds?**

A: Right. You can't just compare what you're paying assigned lawyers to what you're paying us. There are so many interrelations in the system that are outside of what the courts pay lawyers. There's the jail cost, there's the social services, there are a lot of things that are affected.

**Q: How big will the staff be when everyone is hired — including attorneys, investigators and support staff?**

A: The total office, as it was envisioned, in two years will be as many as 68 people.

**Q: What do you want the general public to know about the office and the staff?**

A: They will be skilled and compassionate lawyers representing people in Harris County. And it's going to be something that they're going to be proud of if they just give us a little time to get prepared and grow.

**Q: And what do you tell skeptics and critics of the newly created office?**

A: I've run into a few of them, and they're saying, "Now that I know what it's going to be like, I'm not as skeptical as I was." And I haven't really done all that much yet. I can't begrudge them for their skepticism until we've actually done some business.

**Q: So do criminal defense lawyers need to worry about losing business to the public defenders office?**

A: I don't think there are any good lawyers who need to worry about the office. There's always a place for good lawyers in this town. And they will continue to get appointments because we're not going to take all the appointments.

**Q: You're returning to Houston after being gone for 15 years, so a homecoming of sorts?**

A: I was born and raised in **New York City** and I went to college in Maine. I came to **Houston** in 1982 and went to law school at **South Texas** [College of Law] and met my wife and our kids were born here. I lived here about 13 years.

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