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Texas House Passes County Jail Visitation Bill
Advocates Raise Concern About Amendment

Austin, TX — Today the Texas House of Representatives passed HB 549 by Dallas Rep. Eric Johnson which clarifies the state's standards on visitation at county jails. The bill mandates that county jails afford prisoners two face-to-face, 20-minute, non-contact visits per week, and prohibits counties from eliminating face-to-face visits with new technology like video chats.

The issue of video visitation in Texas has gained national recognition in recent months. The precedent set here in this state will likely have implications for counties in other states around the country that are working to balance budgets and provide the necessary tools and conditions for positive outcomes in criminal justice policy-making. We are very pleased that HB 549 received a floor vote today and we applaud all the legislators that worked hard to ensure its passage.

However, the bill was also passed with an amendment by Houston-area Representative Garnett Coleman that essentially exempts those counties that currently operate facilities where video-only visitation has been implemented from being mandated to provide face-to-face visits. Currently 14 Texas counties have implemented video-only visitation policies. In his introduction of the amendment Coleman cited the significant cost of retrofitting facilities that were built specifically for video visitation that would suffer financially from having to comply with the new law. After a brief discussion on the floor both the amendment and the bill itself passed with an overwhelming majority.

"While we understand that the financial burden of retrofitting these few county facilities is a hardship for counties, we are also very concerned about the families and their incarcerated loved ones who have been stripped of their ability to see each other in person, a practice we know leads to positive outcomes for rehabilitation and recidivism," said Kymberlie Quong Charles, director of criminal justice programs at Grassroots Leadership. "This emotional and financial hardship on families was not calculated when these counties opted to move toward facility construction that precludes face-to-face visitation."

If this legislation passes the Texas Senate, more than 200 Texas counties will be prohibited from eliminating face-to-face visits and that is something to continue to struggle for. Grassroots Leadership will continue working in coalition with its partners to seek justice for families wishing to see their incarcerated loved ones in person, and not through a video monitor.

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