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Date: Nov. 25, 2008

UT Arlington Initiative Receives Grant from Hogg Foundation to Address Lack of Mental Health Services for Texas Exonerees

AUSTIN – The Mental Health Policy Initiative for Texas Exonerees at [the University of Texas at Arlington](http://theuniversityofarlington.edu) was awarded an \$80,990 grant from the [Hogg Foundation for Mental Health](http://hoggfoundation.org) for its groundbreaking research of the mental health needs and lack of services for people who are exonerated after being wrongfully convicted and imprisoned in Texas.

The university is one of six Texas-based organizations that received a total of \$456,565 in grants from the Hogg Foundation in November. The foundation awarded the grants to support timely, meaningful projects that address key issues related to mental health and are likely to improve mental health policies affecting Texas residents.

“The foundation is continuing our longstanding practice of funding projects to address important and relevant mental health issues that directly affect the people of Texas,” said Dr. Octavio N. Martinez Jr., executive director of the foundation. “The grants also will help build interest in and capacity for mental health policy research and development work among nonprofit agencies, academic institutions and government agencies in Texas.”

More than 200 people have been exonerated in the United States, including 33 in Dallas County – the highest number of exonerations in all counties in the United States, according to Dr. Jaimie Page, an assistant professor in the university’s School of Social Work. Page is developing the initiative, the first of its kind in the United States, to explore the mental health needs of Texas exonerees.

“A critical problem in Texas is the lack of any mental health services for exonerees. People who actually commit a felony and are released on parole are eligible for services and resources, but exonerees are not provided any kind of services upon release,” Page said. “The foundation’s grant will enable us to work with exonerees and their families, policy makers, advocacy groups and others to research and address this serious issue.”

Dr. John Stickels, professor of criminal justice and jurisprudence at UT Arlington, has

worked with Page on the project of helping the exonerees. “This program is sorely needed,” Stickels said. “I think any of the exonerees who use this program will be greatly helped by it.”

Most exonerations occur after the wrongly convicted are cleared by DNA testing. The average age of exonerees at the time of incarceration is 26, and the average time served is 12 years. Statistics demonstrate the level of racial disparities in the nation’s criminal justice systems: 62 percent of exonerees are African American, 27 percent are Caucasian and nine percent are Latino.

Page said there are many reasons for a wrongful conviction, but most stem from a disproportionate number of arrests of men of color and false witness identifications. Others can be attributed to mistakes made by overzealous law enforcement officials, faulty interrogations and forensic errors.

Even after their convictions are overturned, exonerees report tremendous shame and stress related to the trauma of being wrongly accused and incarcerated. They also experience tremendous and irreversible losses: of family and friends, the ability to provide for their children, education and employment opportunities, knowledge of current events and financial security.

Page will use the foundation’s grant to work with Dallas-Fort Worth area exonerees and their families to establish their psychiatric status and identify re-entry themes and issues. She also will research services provided in other states and will develop an exoneree mental health policy council in Texas to educate policy makers about the need for mental health services.

“This grant will help Dr. Page address an area of mental health that has long been overlooked. Exonerees deserve and should receive the resources needed to re-establish their lives,” Martinez said.

Page and Stickels also credited the UT Arlington College of Liberal Arts for providing \$10,000 in seed money that initially established the exoneree program. “We are delighted that our support of the work being done by Dr. Page, Dr. Stickels and their team has resulted in this generous support from the Hogg Foundation, which will enable their work to benefit the north Texas community,” said Dr. Beth Wright, dean of the College of Liberal Arts.

The Hogg Foundation was founded in 1940 by Miss Ima Hogg, daughter of former Texas Governor James Stephen Hogg, to promote improved mental health for the people of Texas. The foundation’s grants and programs support mental health consumer services, research, policy analysis and public education projects in Texas. The foundation is part of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin.

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