



Legislation Text

File #: 21-1892, **Version:** 1

To: Harris County Commissioners Court

Through: Clay Bowman, Court Administrator, Harris County District Courts

Prepared By: Clay Bowman, Court Administrator, Harris County District Courts

Subject: SUPPLEMENTAL - Remote Appearance Technology for District Courts

Project ID (If applicable):

Purpose and Request:

Request by the District Courts for approval to use department rollover funds in the amount of \$126,585 to purchase technology equipment to conduct hearings with a mix of in-person and remote appearance by case parties.

Background and Discussion:

During the past year, as courts responded to conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, judges began to hold hearings with parties appearing remotely via teleconferencing (ZOOM). To address the growing case backlog and expedite hearings, courts are requesting technology to support "Hybrid courtrooms" for a mix of in-person and remote appearance by case parties. Equipping 37 courtrooms each with a camera, a Zoom license and control device, and necessary peripherals will allow judges to conduct hearings and trials with some or all parties appearing remotely via Zoom teleconference. Additional equipment, including 9 portable video display carts will be pooled for courts to share as needed. The current situation requires active deployment of shared equipment from a limited inventory by technical support staff. The equipment currently shared will complement the additional equipment requested, to provide coverage for all courts.

"Hybrid courtrooms" will better support bench and jury trials, where some parties appear in-person and other parties appear by video conference. The same equipment will support virtual/in person juries.

Systems will:

- 1) integrate with and complement existing Evidence Presentation Systems as well as with planned system upgrades;
- 2) support more equitable and better quality access to courts for case parties who cannot or choose not to appear in -person;
- 3) provide for a much better participant experience with more perceptible and understandable evidence presentation, leading to more just outcomes;
- 4) create greater capacity among the courts to try under pandemic and post-pandemic circumstances;
- 5) help the in-house technical support team become more efficient by minimizing time currently spent shifting equipment between courts that share the few existing systems.

Fiscal Impact:

The total per court is approximately \$2,858, with shared equipment for all courts at an additional \$20,805. A detailed cost breakdown is attached. Zoom license renewals for future years can be absorbed within the department's technology budget.

Fiscal Summary			
Expenditures	FY 20-21	FY 21-22 Projected	Future Years Projected [3 additional years]
Service Impacted: <i>Depa</i> <i>Family and Juvenile Court</i>			
Existing Budget		\$9,400	\$28,200
Additional Appropriation Request	\$126,585	\$0	\$0
Total Expenditures	\$126,585	\$0	\$0
Funding Sources			
Existing Department Budget			
Please Identify Funding Sources Special Revenue, Grant, etc.			
Department Rollover Funds	\$126,585	\$0	\$0
Total Sources	\$126,585	\$9,400	\$28,200

Alternatives:

The current situation requires active deployment of shared equipment from a limited inventory by technical support staff. This results in delayed opportunity for courts to conduct hearings and commitment of technical staff resources needed for other projects. Shortage of resources for conducting "Hybrid" hearings and trials will contribute to pending case backlog and delay justice for case parties in these courts. The equipment currently shared will complement the additional equipment requested, to provide coverage for all courts.

Alignment with Strategic Objective:

SO8: Provide evidence presentation systems that improve every litigant's ability to seek justice.

Attachments:

Remote Appearance Technology Cost Summary APR2021