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COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS CELEBRATES 7TH ANNIVERSARY OF HOMELESS COURT

Houston, Texas (February 13, 2013) The [Coalition for the Homeless of Houston and Harris County](#) celebrates 7 years of its impactful program, Homeless Court (HC), which assists homeless defendants who wish to resolve outstanding misdemeanor offenses and warrants. Held during special sessions within the City of Houston Municipal Court, the program was modeled on the first homeless court program launched in San Diego in 1989. Homeless Court works to resolve the problems that homelessness presents such as being cited for loitering outside of a convenience store; or sleeping in a public park. HC builds on partnerships between the court, local shelters and service agencies. To learn more about this innovative program visit: <http://www.homelesshouston.org>.

“As Director and Presiding Judge for the City of Houston Municipal Courts, I am not only grateful for the partnership with the Coalition for the Homeless, but also for the invaluable service we provide to the homeless of our community.” said Judge Barbara Hartle. “The goal of the City of Houston Municipal Courts Homeless Dockets is to remove legal barriers for defendants who are homeless and who have not been able to renew or obtain a Texas Drivers License or Identification Card due to outstanding tickets/citations. Obtaining a Driver’s License/Identification Card enables homeless individuals to seek employment and housing. This is accomplished by a combined effort of our Court staff and the Coalition, who offer alternative solutions including community service hours, to resolve outstanding municipal fines and fees.”

“The Coalition created the Houston version of Homeless Court because of the huge outcry for the program from our service providers,” said Marilyn L. Brown, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Coalition. “The offenses occurred due to the client’s homelessness. Once they got off the street and into a program at a service provider, these defendants began taking steps to resolve their problems. A hearing at a special

court session was an opportunity for many to resolve these minor offenses and begin again with a clean slate.”

Homeless service agencies provide programs to clients that address issues such as recovery, education, employment, healthcare and housing. Upon successful participation in a program, a participant will be referred through case management to HC. A judge reviews the submitted proof of program participation, reviews the defendants’ offenses and then sentences the individual. Most often the judge assigns said defendant to community service at the homeless service provider where they are currently residing. The philosophy of the program is rehabilitative rather than punitive. It gives people a chance to better themselves while at the same time resolving a criminal matter.

Stephanie, a former resident of [St. Joseph House](#), has a story that demonstrates how effective this program is for homeless people. St. Joseph House serves people with mental illness. Stephanie used METRO Light Rail as transportation to a doctor’s appointment. She lacked the fare for the trip back to shelter and was cited for “Riding Public Transportation Without Fare” by a METRO police officer. She returned to the shelter distraught because she was in the process of interviewing for several jobs and replacing her State I.D. With the support of the St. Joseph Home case manager, she appeared in Homeless Court and had her ticket and Failure to Appear warrant dismissed. Today she is the receptionist for a prominent Houston-based law firm and has her own apartment.

The **Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County** was established in 1982, incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in 1988, and has evolved to be the lead agency coordinating the community response to homelessness in Houston. Under the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, passed in 2009, an entire community rather than individual service providers must demonstrate success in preventing and reducing homelessness. In 2011, HUD named Houston as a priority community. This designation recognizes the great need to transform Houston’s existing homeless service system and the tremendous opportunity to make significant advances due to the commitment of homeless service providers and key community stakeholders, including both private and public contributors. For more information about the Coalition’s efforts, visit www.homelesshouston.org.

