



your COUNTY connection

HIDALGO COUNTY NEWSLETTER | JANUARY 2014

Dear Hidalgo County Residents:

It is my hope that you enjoyed a wonderful holiday season and are well underway to making the New Year even better than last year. Many of us resolve to improve on the various parts of our life that are important to us. For example, we may resolve to become more physically fit or to maintain a certain balance in our savings account. We in County government are no different. We too are busy reflecting on the successes of 2013, identifying the areas that need to be improved upon and resolving to make Hidalgo County a better place to live and work.



As we look back at 2013, we cannot help but marvel at the remarkable events that helped to make it one of the most memorable in recent history. The years of hard work by many individuals in the transportation arena

continued to pay dividends with the long sought after 'Interstate 69' designation for certain portions of Highway 281. Expressway 83 as we have known for years was designated 'Interstate 2'. We were elated at the merger of the two universities; into what will be known at the University of Texas – RGV and the creation of the valley's medical school. Let us not forget the countless numbers of people who received medical and dental services during Operation Lone Star or the creation of the Health Care Funding District that allows our county to leverage more federal dollars to help subsidize the indigent health program.

We look forward in 2014 to many challenging and exciting projects. We are in the process of developing new ways to streamline our County's budget and making the delivery of County services more effective. We continue to work to providing the important infrastructure needed to improve our quality of life and are ever mindful of the importance of quality roads and effective drainage. So let's get busy Hidalgo County.

Sincerely,

Ramon Garcia

Ramon Garcia
Hidalgo County Judge

HIDALGO COUNTY AMNESTY PROGRAM

Hidalgo County officials held a press conference to inform the public on the commencement of the Hidalgo County Amnesty Program.

On January 1, 2014, Hidalgo County began a 60-day amnesty program, giving individuals who owe



outstanding fines and fees or have outstanding warrants for traffic citations in Justice of the Peace (JP) courts the opportunity to reconcile these matters before the County initiates the statewide Warrant Roundup in March 2014.

The purpose of the Amnesty Program is to encourage persons with outstanding fines, fees and warrants to resolve their offenses; the program will also assist the District Attorney and Justices of the

Peace with eliminating some of these outstanding cases from their dockets. During the Amnesty Program period, the District Attorney and the Justices of the Peace will consider leniency on pending matters in JP courts. The Amnesty Program will run through March 2, 2014.

County officials encourage all residents to take advantage of the Amnesty Period in advance of the upcoming Warrant Round Up. Residents should first determine whether they owe any outstanding JP fines and fees by visiting www.co.hidalgo.tx.us/scofflaw. Individuals with outstanding matters can choose to either pay in full online by credit card, or visit the presiding Justice of the Peace court office and/or the District Attorney Hot Check Division to take advantage of the Amnesty Program.



INFLUENZA & H1N1 UPDATE

Hidalgo County, along with the state of Texas, has seen occurrences of influenza during this year's Influenza Season becoming more prevalent as the season progresses.

According to specialists with Hidalgo County's Influenza Surveillance Program conducted by the Hidalgo County Health and Human Services Department, Hidalgo County has 24 confirmed cases of Influenza A- H1N1 as of January 2, 2014. There has been 1 pediatric influenza death and 5 confirmed adult fatalities related to H1N1 Type A Influenza. All fatalities had pre-existing conditions which were further complicated by the onset of the virus.

Seasonal influenza is not a reportable condition in the state of Texas; local health departments do not receive reported cases of influenza. While influenza-associated pediatric (individuals under the age of 18) mortality cases are reportable, these occur in very rare instances. As a result, counts are estimates and are nearly impossible to track on a regular basis.

Therefore, the Hidalgo County Health and Human Services Department places its emphasis on educating the public on the importance of prevention.

When looking at influenza, prevention is the key to protection for yourself and others. Protect yourself and prevent the flu by getting the flu shot this flu season. The flu shot is available to those 6 months and older, and in variations to accommodate age, allergies, and other conditions.

Prevention can also be achieved by remembering the 4 C's:

1. Clean and wash your hands
2. Cover your cough and sneeze
3. Contain yourself, and stay home if sick
4. Consult your physician, and seek medical attention if ill.

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EFILING IS UNDERWAY IN HIDALGO COUNTY



Though Hidalgo County offices were closed for business on January 1 in observance of the New Year holiday, attorneys and filers were able to access some County government services by means of the new e-filing system for non-criminal cases. Beginning January 1, 2014, all Hidalgo County filings for civil cases in Hidalgo County must be submitted electronically. This means that attorneys will no longer be able to manually file cases in person at the courthouse and must submit documents electronically using the TexFile electronic filing system through one of the state certified e-filing service

providers of their choice.

“The mandatory transition to e-filing marks one of the greatest changes in procedures to happen to the courthouse in years,” said Hidalgo County Clerk Arturo Guajardo, Jr. In December 2012, the Supreme Court of Texas mandated electronic filing in all non-criminal cases in accordance with a phased approach based on County population. The Supreme Court mandate aims to address inefficiencies and expenses relating to the processing, management and storing of paper court documents. As one of the top ten counties based on population, Hidalgo County’s timeline for complying with the mandatory e-filing began on January 1, 2014. The mandate applies to all civil cases, including family and probate cases, by attorneys in appellate courts, district courts, statutory county courts, constitutional county courts, and statutory probate courts.

Hidalgo County officials have been preparing for this mandatory transition for several months; on September 17, 2013 they commenced a voluntary transition to e-filing. “The purpose of the early transition was to allow attorneys and their staff, and other filers, enough time to become accustomed to using the new electronic filing system and

procedures to ensure 100% compliance with the new law this January,” said Hidalgo County District Clerk Laura Hinojosa. The County hosted an E-filing Service Provider (EFSP) fair at the courthouse, where dozens of attorneys were in attendance to meet with state certified vendors offering e-filing services, view their products and services, and discuss any questions or concerns. The County also hosted several e-filing webinar trainings and question-and-answer sessions at the courthouse auditorium for attorneys and filers to get a live demonstration and training of the systems available to them.



An Efiling Vendor explaining how the new electronic filing system works to spectators.

COUNTY TO TRANSITION TO ONLINE JOB APPLICATIONS

The Hidalgo County Human Resources Department is improving its hiring process and making it easier and more convenient to apply for jobs at Hidalgo County. On January 31, 2014, all applications for employment with Hidalgo County must be submitted via the online job portal. Paper applications will no longer be accepted by the HR department.

The online job applications will be managed through the county’s current website provider CivicPlus. Using this technology, HR and other departments will manage online records to expedite hiring and provide even greater accountability when selecting new employees.

Currently, prospective job applicants must print out a paper application, fill it out and deliver it to the HR department for each position sought. This new system will eliminate those steps by streamlining the job search and application process, allowing candidates to submit applications electronically. Job seekers will be able to quickly apply for County positions via the website www.co.hidalgo.tx.us/jobs. Candidates can apply for current vacancies and even select an option to be notified of openings that become available within their area of interest. An email address is required for submitting an application, and email will be the primary means of communication between the County and the applicant during

the selection process.

Applications will be screened based on the requirements of the job description for the open position, allowing hiring managers to more effectively sort through a pool of applicants and more easily select the most qualified candidates. This online system will also provide job seekers with electronic confirmation e-mails that their applications was accepted, if they are eligible for an interview or if they did not qualify for the position.

The switch to online job applications will be a major change in the job application process, and Hidalgo County officials want all residents and interested applicants to be aware of the new procedures and requirements. Certain positions require special documentation such as transcripts, certificates, or licenses, for example; these documents must be attached electronically to the online application before the application is considered. Failure to include all documentation that is required will render the application incomplete and the applicant may not be considered for employment.

“We are excited to provide this new and convenient option to prospective applicants seeking employment with the County,” stated Human Resources Director Esther Cortez.

“With the controls of this new system, the County will also benefit by ensuring that the most qualified applicants are introduced into our workforce,” she continued.

Chief Information Officer Renan Ramirez added, “The new technology will reduce cost and administrative man hours spent cataloging and scanning application information, making this transition convenient to applicants and cost-effective for the County.”

The online application system went into effect on January 31, 2014, at which point the Human Resources Department is no longer accepting walk-in paper applications.

For questions, please call the Human Resources Department at 956-318-2660.



ELECTIONS DEPARTMENT MAILS OUT VOTER REGISTRATION CERTIFICATES

Hidalgo County Elections Administrator Yvonne Ramón is urging voters to be on the lookout for their new voter registration certificates, which should have landed in their mailboxes before the New Year. Nearly 300,000 certificates were mailed out on December 5, 2013 by the Elections Department for use in the upcoming 2014 elections.

The new orange cards, which are replacing last year's yellow certificates, verify a resident's eligibility to vote in the elections and inform voters in which voting precinct they reside. As a reminder, voters must present an acceptable photo identification at the polls to vote. Presenting their voter registration certificate along with their photo identification may make the check-in process to vote more convenient.

Voters are instructed to check their new certificate for any information that is incorrect or has been changed, such as the spelling of their name or their address. The name on the certificate should match the name on the photo identification they will be using at the polls. If they don't match, the voter should make any corrections on the certificate and mail it back to the elections office. If a voter registration certificate is returned to the county, the Elections Department will mail out an application for a change of address. Election officials are also asking for the public's help in returning certificates with incorrect addresses or those of deceased individuals, so they may update their records.

Mrs. Ramón also recommends residents take note of the precinct number listed to the right of the voter's birth year. Recent redistricting has expanded the precincts to 257 precincts, and voters need to be made aware of their respective precincts.

"Due to recent redistricting and various annexations throughout the county, there may be changes to their precinct number and representation," said Mrs. Ramón. "Voters need to review their certificate and be informed before identifying their polling location and heading out to vote."

If any irregularities are found on the voter registration certificate or if residents have not received their certificate in the mail they must contact the Elections Department immediately at 956.318.2570.

All changes to voter registration certificates must be made prior to Monday, February 3, 2013, which is the last day to submit an application to register to vote for the March 4, 2013 primary elections.



RESOLUTION IN HONOR OF ANDY VELIZ

Precinct 1 Commissioner A.C. Cuellar brought forth a resolution honoring the life and work of Weslaco resident Andy Veliz. The resolution was adopted unanimously by the Commissioners' Court. It cited Veliz's dedication to achieving his aspirations, nurturing his talents and sharing his work both on stage and in the classroom. As an educator and administrator, he still pursued his love for music and became known as "The Singing Principal;" in 1980, Veliz wrote "Lonely Nights Without You," which became a statewide hit later that year. Veliz retired from public education after 29 years of service and presently teaches at the University of Texas - Pan American College of Education but continues to serve his community. Hidalgo County salutes Mr. Veliz and his family for this recognition and for continuing to promote his love of music and his passion for education. Congratulations Mr. Veliz.



JUDGE JESSE CONTRERAS HOLDS LIFE CLASS FOR JUVENILES

As judge of Hidalgo County's juvenile justice court, 449th State District Judge Jesse Contreras noticed that he was seeing repeat offenders cycling through his court. He wondered if there was something more he could be doing to help reduce criminal activity among the youth he encountered in his courtroom.



Judge Contreras had the idea to convene "life classes" for the juvenile offenders on supervision. The purpose of these sessions is to encourage and motivate the youth to overcome their missteps and mistakes in life, and get back on track toward setting and achieving their goals. Judge Contreras began the life classes on December 2013 and invites guest speakers to address a group of approximately 50 youth. At a life class held recently, KRGV Channel 5 Reporter Joe Augustine was in attendance

and shared his personal narrative, education and career choice with the group.

Hailing from Iowa, and having grown up in Chicago and Milwaukee, Augustine noted that as a reporter covering South Texas he has recognized that youth in this area face unique challenges and temptations, unlike anywhere else he has seen. "The temptations are going to be there, but these temptations will keep you from achieving your goals," Augustine stated.

Augustine recounted his childhood, stating that he was fortunate to have had parents and an older brother who kept him on the "straight and narrow." His brother, he noted, had gone down a troubled path in his youth and ended up attending military school; his brother's experience helped to keep Augustine disciplined and on the right path.

Augustine urged the group of juveniles, "Don't become another statistic; don't be just another name on the docket. Set a goal, and achieve it. Everyone makes mistakes, but make it once, learn from it, and don't make the same mistake again." Augustine also encouraged them to read - books, the newspaper, magazines - to know what is going on in the world in order to be able to have discussions with others about current events. He also urged them to write, which is the essence of his career in journalism - to

tell stories clearly and concisely so that everyone can understand.

After Augustine's message, Judge Contreras further encouraged the group to set and achieve realistic goals, and strive to do better in their lives. "All of you have incredible stories to tell, and we are all going to set goals to achieve by March," Judge Contreras said. He continued, "Our new slogan is 'Yes, I will,' because when we say it like that, it means it will happen." He then had each attendee introduce themselves at the podium and declare their personal goals to achieve by March.

Goals included:

- Pass my classes
- Follow rules, stay out of trouble
- Go to school every day
- Take care of my Mom
- Get good grades
- Don't skip school

Judge Contreras will continue holding these life classes on a regular basis with the youth, hoping to encourage and motivate them to steer away from a life of crime and work towards achieving and accomplishing their goals.

For more information, contact the 449th District Court at (956) 381-0744

DISTRICT CLERK'S OFFICE STAFF RAISES \$3000

Hidalgo County District Clerk's Staff presented a check totaling \$3,000 to Ronald McDonald House Charities of the RGV, as part of their Blues for Bucks Workplace Fundraising Campaign to benefit local charitable organizations.

Ronald McDonald House Charities provides a home-away-from-home for families whose seriously-ill children are receiving medical care at local hospitals and clinics. Since their doors opened in 1998, more than 1,500 families have called the Rio Grande Valley's Ronald McDonald House home. Although based out of Harlingen, the Ronald McDonald House currently hosts a "Family Room" in the Edinburg Children's Hospital offering families with sick children a place to stay.

"We are grateful and commend the district clerk staff for their efforts," says LaHuan Guthrie, Development Manager at the Ronald McDonald House. "We want to continue to support more children throughout their recovery and give more families a comfortable place to stay during their difficult time. Its people like the district clerk staff that help us provide stable and vital resources to children in need."

The District Clerk's office kicked off their charitable efforts in 2008. The program, which allows department staff to wear jeans every Friday in exchange for a \$5 donation, has since then expanded to the creation of a "charitable organizations list" of which the staff randomly selects a recipient

every six months. Over the past four years the district clerk office has collected over \$36,000 which has gone to local charitable organizations throughout Hidalgo County.

"We are blessed beyond belief and welcome the opportunity to give back, as little as it may be," says Laura Hinojosa, Hidalgo County District Clerk. "We are humbled to partner with Ronald McDonald House Charities of the RGV as they work diligently to make a difference in the lives of sick children and families in Hidalgo County and beyond."

Learn more about the Ronald McDonald House of the RGV by calling 956.412.7200 or log on to their website at www.rmhcrgv.org.



Hidalgo County District Clerk's Staff

13TH COURT OF APPEALS RECOGNIZES THE LATE DAVID HOCKEMA

The 13th Court of Appeals spent time reminiscing about their old friend and colleague that taught them tenacity and how to enjoy life. On November 20, 2013 the 13th Court of Appeals presented a resolution honoring the late McAllen, Texas Lawyer David Hockema who died July 1, 2013. Family and friends gathered and shared stories of the great adventures they shared with Mr. Hockema and expressed how Hidalgo County did not only lose a great lawyer, but a loyal, trusted friend. Mr. Hockema's wife, 13th Court of Appeals Justice Nora Longoria, welcomed all who attended and shared the wonderful memories of her husband's life. State Representative District 40 Terry Canales was present and also shared fond memories of his late friend. Representative Canales introduced State Representative District 41 Bobby Guerra to read the resolution. Written by the his staff and State Legislative Council, Representative Guerra proudly read the resolution which described Mr. Hockema as a distinguished attorney who loved his profession and will be remembered for his generous spirit and many accomplishments. After the reading of the resolution, dignitaries, attorneys, family and friends mingled and continued to share their stories of their friend, David Hockema.



APPLAUSE

ECISD Board of Trustees

Hidalgo County Commissioners Court approved a resolution recognizing the Edinburg Consolidated School District Board of Trustees for receiving the 2013 Outstanding School Board of the Year Award by the Texas Association of School Administrators for the implementation of the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative. In July, the Board was named as the 2013 Regional School Board of the Year by Region One and in August they were selected as 1 of 5 Texas Honor School Boards. During a ceremony on September 27th in Houston, Texas the ECISD Board were interviewed by the Texas Association of School Board Committee and after careful consideration they were chosen as the 2013 Outstanding School Board of the Year, beating out over 1,250 school districts in Texas.



CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

On November 16, 2013, the Hidalgo County Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service held a Centennial Celebration in recognition of the 100th anniversary of Extension's presence in Hidalgo County. Over 100 leaders, farmers, parents, children, and families were in attendance to welcome special guest, Dr. Douglas Steele, Director of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, who discussed Extension's 100 years of extending knowledge and changing lives. Also in attendance were former Congressman Kika de la Garza, State Senator Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, and Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia, among many other prominent agricultural community leaders. Testimonials were heard from individuals who shared their personal experiences about Extension's impact on their lives and their families.

The official 100th anniversary was on January 14, 2014. Since 1914, over a year before Texas created the Extension Service, there was a strong Extension Service presence in our area. This was due to the fact that the area was quickly becoming a booming agricultural mecca.

Extension Service has played an integral role in supporting the immediate needs of our residents, but also in adapting and accommodating as the times have changed. From teaching residents how to can and store their harvest for sustainable

consumption in the winter, to nowadays teaching residents the value of a balanced diet and exercise to maintain a healthy lifestyle, Extension Service continues to meet the needs of our community, and will continue to meet the needs of our residents in the future.

Congratulations to Extension Service on this momentous occasion!

