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TFDP SUES CALDWELL COUNTY OVER CLOSED-DOOR CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

LOCKHART, TX – Today the Texas Fair Defense Project (TFDP) and the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University filed a lawsuit against Caldwell County for holding criminal proceedings in secret. Plaintiffs—Texas Tribune, Mano Amiga, and Caldwell/Hays Examiner—were denied access to magistration proceedings in Caldwell County in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments.

Attending magistration is critical, because it allows the public and the press to learn first-hand about accusations by police, whether there were proper grounds for an arrest, and whether the person arrested wishes to exercise their right to counsel. It is also where the court sets bail, which often determines whether the person arrested will spend the next days, weeks, or years of their life in jail. Yet, in Caldwell County, all of this happens behind closed doors.

“A blanket ban on public access to courtrooms isn’t good for anyone,” says Caldwell/Hays Examiner publisher Jordan Buckley. “Victims, family members, community members, and the press all have a right to see what happens at magistration. It erodes public trust in the judicial system when we cannot see what our tax dollars are paying for.”

“Access to magistration ensures people who are arrested are treated fairly and their ability to pay is taken into account in setting bail,” adds Eric Martinez, Executive and Policy Director at Plaintiff Mano Amiga. “Even a few days in jail can lead to loss of jobs, vehicles and housing – consequences that devastate families and communities of the accused and underscore the importance of their right to attend magistration.”

“Open courts are a hallmark of American democracy,” says TFDP Managing Attorney of Litigation Camilla Hsu. “Allowing the press and the public into the courtroom helps ensure transparency and accountability. We shouldn’t deprive someone of their liberty in secret.”

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About Texas Fair Defense Project
The Texas Fair Defense Project fights to end the criminalization of poverty in Texas. We envision a system of justice that upholds the dignity and civil rights of all people, regardless of income, race, or gender.