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No employee benefit cuts, but Harris County targets departments for reductions amid \$48M budget deficit

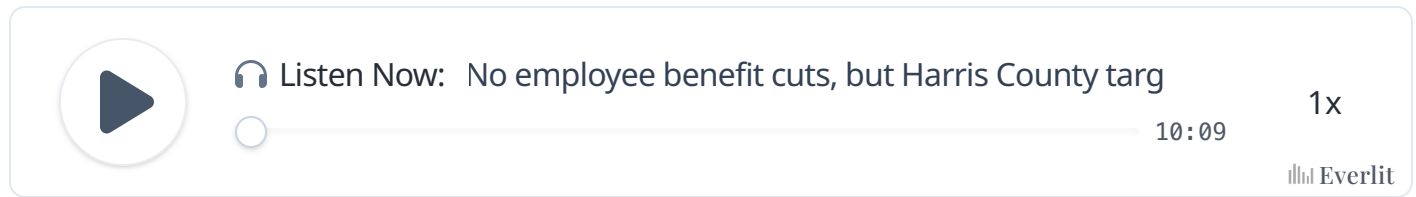
By **John Lomax V**, Staff Writer

Aug 19, 2025



Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo comments on the county deficits and potential cuts to the budget during a news briefing in Katy, Thursday, Aug. 14, 2025.

Kirk Sides/Houston Chronicle



Harris County's deficit remains at roughly \$48 million following a decision Thursday not to cut employee benefits or pension contributions.

The county's \$2.7 billion budget will likely need to be balanced by cuts to some of the county's major departments, including Harris County Public Health, Engineering and Housing and Community Development, according to an internal email shared with the Houston Chronicle.

It's the latest move in a game of financial Jenga that's driven a rift between the court's four Democrats. Judge Lina Hidalgo and Commissioner Rodney Ellis have voiced concerns that the proposed budget would slash crucial services, while Commissioners Adrian Garcia and Lesley Briones advocated cutting vacant positions and implementing common-sense efficiencies that they allege would have a negligible impact on county-run programs.

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"We all know we have a deficit, and what we have done is lean in to being solutions-oriented — finding ways we could do more with less, finding those savings," Briones said during a news conference held Thursday morning. "Some would like you to believe that the sky has fallen, that there will be devastating cuts in this dystopian universe, false."

PATROL: Some neighborhoods and HOAs to shoulder part of constable pay raises, Harris County officials say

While Garcia and Briones lobbed vague accusations of unnamed actors seeking to spread “false narratives,” Hidalgo told reporters at a separate news conference just 30 minutes later that Briones and Garcia — two parts of what she later dubbed the “GOP 3” along with Republican Commissioner Tom Ramsey — were attempting to steer the narrative in their favor.

Hidalgo accused the pair of obfuscating the impact of a previous vote to provide sweeping raises to county law enforcement officers. The raises were intended to prevent an exodus of deputies to the Houston Police Department, which triggered a domino effect following the city’s approval of a \$1 billion police contract that included a 36.5% raise for officers spread across five years.

“Our hands are tied because my colleagues decided not to go to the voters on this \$108 million increase for law enforcement that we couldn't afford,” Hidalgo said. “Not only are elected leaders putting your county in the hole, but they are refusing to ask you whether you would like to see cuts. We are forcing you to have cuts.”

Although the raises were initially projected to cost the county roughly \$140 million, that estimate proved to be an additional \$30 million more than the actual cost.

Nancy Sims, a political science lecturer at the University of Houston, said the county had to act fast to prevent its deputies from fleeing en masse to HPD, and that there wasn’t enough time to get a tax increase on the ballot. But that doesn’t mean voters won’t see a tax increase proposal at the ballot box a year from now, she said.

“They had to raise their folks, and there wasn't enough time to plot out how best to present that to the voters with an August deadline for the ballot,” Sims said. “But

they're going to say long term, just like the City of Houston has done, you're going to have to sacrifice other services to keep this bill paid. Or you're going to have to be willing to contribute more to pay it.”

NARRATIVES: Judge Lina Hidalgo, Harris County commissioners clash over deficit framing: ‘False narrative’

Sims said law enforcement is the No. 1 local issue for voters across virtually all demographics and both sides of the political spectrum, which makes it a touchy subject for Briones and Garcia, both of whom are running for re-election in 2026.

But Sims said the campaign trail will give the pair the perfect opportunity to solicit voters for a tax hike.

“You need to build up support for that over time. This will give them all of next year, when they're campaigning, the opportunity to say: ‘Hey, you want more law enforcement, you're gonna have to pay for it,’” Sims said.

Harris County currently boasts a tax rate on the lower side of counties in Texas. At around 38 cents per \$100 in assessed value, Harris County's rate ranks in the bottom half of Texas counties.

What departments could see cuts?



Harris County District Attorney Sean Teare chats with prosecuting attorneys during the trial of Oscar Rosales in Houston, Thursday, June 12, 2025.

Kirk Sides/Houston Chronicle

Departments other than the county's law enforcement agencies, which are shielded from budget cuts under Texas law, will have to dig deeper to find savings other than what was initially asked of them. That will likely prove difficult as officials had already begun voicing concerns over how the proposed budget would impact their bottom line.

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Initial projections varied from department to department, but First Assistant District Attorney Chandler Raine said in an internal email provided to the Houston Chronicle

that his office — already grappling with an exodus of prosecutors — was asked to absorb \$7.6 million in costs under the initial round of proposed cuts.

The proposed budget reduction would have a direct impact on services such as the District Attorney's Mental Health and Diversion, which provides treatment and alternatives to jail time for people experiencing mental health crises, and Domestic Violence Bureaus, Raine said.

"If this cut stands, we will be forced to make difficult decisions and absorb a \$7.6 million shortfall within our operations," Raine wrote in the Aug. 6 email. "The greatest impact will be felt in our Mental Health and Diversion Bureau, our Domestic Violence Bureau and our Intake and Grand Jury Bureau."

But Raine is not the only county official raising alarm bells over the county's proposed budget. A similar refrain was echoed by Judge Jerry W. Simoneaux, who oversees one of the county's five probate courts.

As a probate judge, Simoneaux's responsibilities include administering estates and ruling on other end-of-life matters, as well as assigning guardianships for individuals who are unable to care for themselves. State law requires probate courts routinely visit the homes of assigned guardians to ensure they are providing adequate care — something which Simoneaux said he is unable to do with his current budget.

"Harris County's probate courts are handling record caseloads as our population grows and ages. Yet instead of providing the resources we need, the county is proposing cuts to our budget," Simoneaux wrote in a LinkedIn post. "We are already so understaffed that we cannot fulfill our legal duty to visit every ward under court protection each year."

Simoneaux told the Houston Chronicle that there are as many as 1,800 protected persons, or “wards,” that his court investigators are statutorily required to physically check in with each year. But with just one full-time investigator, Simoneaux said he’s had to deputize another employee previously assigned to other duties and rely on volunteers from the University of Houston’s Graduate College of Social Work to do what he can.

OPINION: Shiny new Harris County Probate Court 5 deserves an energetic judge

Even with the additional help, Simoneaux said his staff is spread too thin to visit nearly 2,000 homes each year. He said he doesn’t think commissioners understand the full scope of the issue impacting the county’s probate courts.

“I don't think the county commissioners understand what's going on in the probate court. I don't blame them,” Simoneaux said. “But we're all understaffed to the point where people are afraid to take vacations that they're entitled to.”

Simoneaux worked as an attorney in the probate court system in 2008. Since then, he said the caseload has tripled but staff sizes have remained largely stagnant.

Although the proposed cut to his budget is relatively marginal — just \$26,000 of over \$2 million, according to a screenshot of a budget memo included in his post — he said the county should be investing in probate courts, not cutting them.

Leah Barton, interim director of Harris County Public Health, said the initial proposed cut to her department would have “significant impact,” on the services it provides, including emergency preparedness and response. She said the department identified 16 positions it is considering cutting, only some of which are currently vacant.

“With nearly \$4 million requested of us, that will have some impact. That includes things like not holding the Violence Prevention Conference, reducing our mosquito and vector control activities, and reducing some of our public health emergency preparedness and response activities,” Barton said at Thursday’s meeting. “We tried to emphasize non-labor where possible, but these cuts do have a significant impact.”

TAXES: How does Harris County's tax rate compare to other Texas counties?

Truth between narratives

The truth about Harris County’s deficit lies somewhere between the competing narratives advanced by its fractured Democratic majority.

Large-scale, sweeping layoffs are unlikely, but some people will lose their jobs. The sky isn’t falling, but it is at least partially being propped up with duct tape and glue in the form of one-time funding sources that will disappear next year.

A \$20 million transfer of COVID-era relief funds, an anticipated \$18 million sale of county property and a \$10 million reduction in contributions to the county’s rainy day fund account for nearly \$50 million that officials plan to use to help keep the county afloat through fiscal year 2026.

Meanwhile, the two primary drivers of the deficit — indigent defense and jail outsourcing — remain a concern for officials through next fiscal year and beyond. Although Daniel Ramos, the county’s budget director, said progress has been made in reducing the court’s backlog and freeing space in the jail, he is projecting costs to remain the same through at least 2026.

TOOL: The top-paid Harris County employees of 2024: Search our database

Ramos said the county is essentially in a crunch period where, in order to reduce jail outsourcing, the county has to put more cases to trial to free space in the jail. That means the county will have to simultaneously pay for outsourced inmates while also paying trial costs to cut through the backlog with the intent of ultimately eliminating the need for outsourcing altogether.

“The No. 1 issue that we've dealt with is the increase in costs related to indigent defense. That has, I believe, more than doubled during my four budget cycles here,” Ramos said at Thursday’s meeting. “We're seeing cases go to trial, and that means all the associated trial costs are affecting our budget. But that also means that we're eating into the court backlog, and more importantly, we're eating into the folks that are still in jail.”

The county’s deficit is the worst since the years immediately following the 2008 financial crisis, and regardless of how commissioners decide to balance it, there will be “pain,” Ramos said. They have until early September to finalize the budget and determine exactly what that pain will look like.

Hidalgo said Commissioners Court is expected to finalize its cuts at a meeting held Sept. 9 and will finalize the tax rate for fiscal year 2026 shortly afterward. The proposed budget will take effect in fiscal year 2026, which begins Oct. 1.

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John Lomax V covers Harris County government for the Houston Chronicle.

A graduate of the University of Houston and a lifelong resident of the city, John is passionate about government watchdog reporting and driven by the mission of digging deep to find out information people want to know. He is the son of renowned Houston journalist John Nova Lomax, who wrote for numerous publications and was a former senior editor at Texas Monthly.

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