

**POLITICS // HOUSTON POLITICS**

# How will Harris County budget cuts impact residents? Here's what an expert says.

By **John Lomax V**, Staff Writer

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 Gift Article

Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo and Harris County Commissioners listen as citizens voice concerns with Harris County flood control directives during Commissioners Court in Houston, Thursday, June 26, 2025.

Kirk Sides/Houston Chronicle



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Harris County is one step closer to bridging a \$275 projected deficit for the coming fiscal year, but uncertainty regarding the impact of cuts to dozens of departments remains.

Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo has said the slate of department cuts will have a dire impact on area residents. The numbers, however, paint a more complex picture. Outside of specialized programs such as the early child care program championed by Hidalgo, the more-than 4 million residents who live in Harris County likely won't see an immediate impact to services or programs, according to Nancy Sims, a political science lecturer at the University of Houston.



Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo speaks during a press conference regarding her decision to not run for another term in Houston on Tuesday, Sept. 16, 2025.

Elizabeth Conley/Houston Chronicle

“There will be a loss of some of those new programs that were created, like the program that has gotten the county judge very worked up,” Sims said. “I think in terms of residents’ experience of day-to-day governing, they’re not going to feel that much.”

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Commissioners approved a series of budget amendments in a charged meeting last week that culminated in Hidalgo’s premature departure. The judge, apparently frustrated with commissioners’ refusal to restore funding for several programs geared toward children, left the meeting roughly an hour before it ended.

The divisive budget process has emerged at the center of a dispute between the court's four Democrats. Hidalgo and Commissioner Rodney Ellis have emerged as champions of a package of programs slated to be cut in fiscal year 2026, while Democratic Commissioners Adrian Garcia and Lesley Briones have joined with the court's lone Republican, Commissioner Tom Ramsey, to form a bipartisan voting block that spearheaded a controversial vote to provide sweeping raises to county law enforcement.

Sims has been an active member of Houston's political scene for more than 30 years. She said this year's budget process has been unlike anything she's seen.

"Usually, the county operates quietly, and they take care of their business quietly," Sims said. "But this year, there's been more tension, more public discussion, more outrage than I've ever seen at the county."

The raises, which were approved in May following the City of Houston's decision to provide a \$1 billion pay increase over five years to its officers, account for roughly \$101 million of the county's projected deficit. Briones, Garcia and Ramsey argued they were necessary to prevent a mass exodus of officers from the county's various law enforcement departments.

But the salary increases came amid enhanced requirements brought by new state legislation, an end to funding provided through the American Rescue Plan Act and existing inequities across county departments that, taken together, have made Harris County's outlook for the coming year particularly precarious.

It's a situation that's compounded by indigent defense and jail outsourcing — two of the main factors weighing down the county's budget deficit. Daniel Ramos, the county's budget director, said he anticipates the backlog to go down in coming

years, which will ease pressure on the jail system and hopefully free beds to reduce outsourcing.

Commissioners Court hastily approved raises for the county's law enforcement as other departments and offices in Harris County's justice system struggle to keep their head above water. The county has less than half the prosecutors employed by Chicago's Cook County, which has a population of around 5 million, and other local officials, such as the District Clerk, say their employees have historically been underpaid.

"We are behind the scenes cog in the wheel of justice in Harris County, and it cannot move forward without us," said Harris County District Clerk Marilyn Burgess in an interview with a reporter. "But my office has traditionally been one of the lowest paid."

New legislation requiring enhanced reporting and documentation throughout the court process has further strained Burgess' overworked and underpaid staff, she said. Senate Bill 9 requires bail for certain offenses to be set by an elected judge as opposed to a magistrate, limits the use of cashless bonds for violent offenders and adds new reporting standards.

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Senate Joint Resolution 5, if approved by voters in November, amends the Texas Constitution to permit the denial of bail for certain violent offenses.

"It is not smart to massively increase salaries for a select few while denying raises for the majority. You must adequately fund my office to meet the demands of these legislative mandates," Burgess said at a Sept. 3 budget hearing. "I urge you to



consider not only the numbers on the page but the people who make our justice system function every day.”

Burgess said that, without the staff and support of the District Clerk's office, the court system would grind to a halt — potentially leading to a reversal of the backlog's downward trajectory.

## ARPA programs stagnant



Ashley Leissner, center left, learns CPR with another Harris County Jail inmate as Detention Officer Kathleen Pruessner, right, instructs them Wednesday, Oct. 16, 2024, at the Harris County Jail's Women's Empowerment Center in Houston.

Jon Shapley/Staff photographer

Among the line items tallied to square the county's deficit is a \$21 million transfer from its ARPA portfolio. The money — all of it allocated to ongoing projects — came

from the county’s ARPA FLEX fund, which is generated through interest accrued from the original grant.

The county received nearly \$1 billion as part of a package of COVID-era relief measures passed under the Biden administration. The final deadline to spend ARPA funds is Dec. 31. While other municipalities, including the City of Houston, took steps to get ahead of the end-of-year deadline, Sims said she did not see Commissioners Court do the same.

“I’m a little surprised at the county’s dependence on ARPA. Everybody knew it was ending, and they seem to have started up some programs knowing that the money would end at some point,” Sims said. “They were very aggressive with their ARPA spending. While I watched the city fully prepare for the ARPA funds to leave, I didn’t see the same at the county.”

**FINAL HOUR:** Lina Hidalgo calls on commissioners to delay \$100M deputy pay raise package in last-ditch budget play

Harris County commissioners approved a host of pilot programs and positions that will soon be without funding as the federal government cuts the flow of ARPA dollars. Early childcare initiatives, associate judge positions and, until recently, certain prosecutors employed by the district attorney, were all funded through ARPA.

Commissioners unanimously approved in August the reallocation of \$8.9 million from seven ARPA-funded programs that are no longer active.

**ARPA project cuts unanimously approved by commissioners**

The offsets in this table include projects that are no longer active.

PROJECT	REDUCTION
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Emergency Nursing	4,647,288
Wastewater	2,648,143
Disparity Studies	1,000,000
Harris County Opportunity Fund	51,025
FTE for Re-entry Capacity Supports	450,000
Gun Buyback Events	59,754
911 Tapes	15,122

Among the first tranche of programs were a wastewater program that provided sewer connections for neighborhoods in East Aldine — distinct from Harris County’s wastewater monitoring program, which remains funded through June 2026 — an emergency fund for nursing capacity created during the COVID shortage and a \$1 million allocation for compensation disparity studies.

But the remaining \$11.9 million in ARPA cuts proved more controversial. Hidalgo and Ellis both voted against defunding the eight projects included in the second group of ARPA programs. Commissioners voted at the Sept. 9 meeting 3-2 to approve the cuts, which include millions in reductions to several early childhood initiatives.

But the majority of those programs had already reached the goals, or key performance indicators, they set when they were created. Others, such as the SHINE Facility Fund, which invests in the development and expansion of child care centers in Harris County, are capable of achieving their goals even with a reduction in funding, said Estella Gonzalez, executive director of the Harris County Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity at the Sept. 9 meeting.

## ARPA projects approved for reductions by a majority of commissioners

Judge Lina Hidalgo and Commissioner Rodney Ellis voted against cuts to these projects.



PROJECT	REDUCTION
Shine Facility Fund	1,150,000
Accessible Child Care Training Supports (ACCTS)	1,468,000
Single Family Rehab	2,000,000
Early Learning Quality Network	269,290
ACCESS Harris	3,800,000
Lead Abatement	754,000
Single Family Homeowner Assistance	2,000,000
Re-entry Mini Grants (WEC)	500,000

Gonzalez said the same was true for the Accessible Child Care Training Supports program, which provides workforce development and training for early child care professionals.

Other programs, such as two run by the Department of Housing and Community Development and a re-entry program for formerly incarcerated women run by the Women's Empowerment Center, appeared to have stagnated, according to the July 2025 ARPA Recovery Plan Report published by the county.

The Single Family Reconstruction program, designed to preserve up to 30 affordable homes owned by low-to-middle-income residents, had preserved zero homes as of July. Similarly, the Single Family Rehab program, which was intended to provide specific home maintenance services to low-income families, also reported zero completed projects as of July.

**FISCAL PROBLEMS:** Harris County commissioners consider hiring freeze to fill budget deficit

A representative for the department said the numbers included in the report were accurate at the time of publication, but it has since begun construction on three

homes.

Although the WEC’s re-entry program did achieve initial success, it has since stalled. The 2024 ARPA report indicated the program assisted 651 people in 2024 — a figure that remained unchanged in the 2025 report.

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intended as proof-of-concept pilots that, if successful, would ideally be transferred to the general fund. Hidalgo said commissioners were effectively using money that could have gone to serving even more residents and used it to plug a budget gap.

“So they are taking money they had given you that you would have served families with, and now you are not serving those families,” Hidalgo said. “You would have served 10 families instead of eight.”

The cut to Harris County’s Lead Abatement Program, which provides screening and lead removal services for low-income homeowners and renters, will reduce its scope by nearly 20 homes, said Romeo Solis, director of the Portfolio Management Office at the Office of County Administration.

“I think they would be reducing the number of homes by 17,” Solis said. “So we would be reducing the amount of service.”

## By the numbers

### Harris County budget - fiscal year 2025 adopted vs fiscal year 2026 proposed.

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Department name	fy 25 adopted	FY26 Proposed	DIFF
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Sheriff - Medical	\$108,568,632	\$30,068,632	-72%
Office of County Administration	\$24,697,705	\$12,825,009	-48%
Economic Equity & Opportunity	\$8,758,487	\$7,177,050	-18%
Justice of the Peace, 8-2	\$1,054,577	\$867,232	-18%
General Administrative	\$231,487,394	\$193,881,962	-16%
Justice of the Peace, 6-2	\$1,026,080	\$861,451	-16%
Justice of the Peace, 6-1	\$1,119,711	\$944,836	-16%
Justice of the Peace, 2-2	\$1,252,335	\$1,077,548	-14%
Justice of the Peace, 2-1	\$1,297,255	\$1,146,073	-12%
Justice of the Peace, 7-1	\$1,463,211	\$1,298,152	-11%
Justice of the Peace, 3-2	\$1,494,603	\$1,326,663	-11%
Justice of the Peace, 7-2	\$1,262,527	\$1,129,587	-11%
County Attorney	\$44,267,864	\$39,676,955	-10%
Justice of the Peace, 8-1	\$1,511,216	\$1,361,623	-10%
Engineering	\$85,847,746	\$78,800,251	-8%

The first volume of the most recent version of the county's budget book, now on its fifth iteration, does not include figures for department spending in fiscal year 2025, which will not be available until the end of the fiscal year. That leaves just funding approved during last year's budget process to use as a point of comparison, which does not include mid-year adjustments and one-time funding.

It also does not account for department budgets that had costs shifted to other departments and purpose-built funds, such as the 16 justices of the peace, the County Attorney's Office and the Sheriff's Office's medical division, which provides healthcare to people incarcerated in the Harris County Jail. The Harris Health system has since assumed responsibility for providing medical care to inmates.

Cuts to these departments will not result in immediate service reductions, but concerns regarding the sustainability of the alternative funding sources used to backfill their budgets remain.

**LOCAL EVENT:** Harris County Commissioners approve nearly \$470K to sponsor Gay Softball World Series

Judge Victor Treviño III voiced skepticism at a budget hearing held Sept. 2 that the Justice Support Fund would not generate the anticipated \$4 million necessary to backfill cuts to the county's justices of the peace.

Deputy County Attorney and First Assistant County Attorney Jonathan Fombonne said that, although his office planned to absorb a \$5 million budget cut using its discretionary fund, the CAO had already been grappling with a three-year streak of stagnant allocations.

"With the exception of delinquent property tax collections, our office has not really received a budget increase since 2022," Fombonne said. "Now in the proposed fiscal year 2026 budget, we are facing one of the largest cuts of any county department ... That's why the CAO is shifting those positions to our discretionary fund to preserve critical operations. By doing this, we're effectively defunding about 50 positions from the general fund, demonstrating that we can do more with less while continuing to deliver value."

## Certain departments feel pinch

While available data omits critical allocations, such as a \$7.5 million adjustment approved for the District Attorney's office in April, it does provide some insight on the potential impact of cuts approved by commissioners at Tuesday's meeting.

Among the departments slated to be cut with no alternative funding sources are Universal Services' IT department, Engineering, the Office of County Administration and the Harris County Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity — all of which face at least a 7.5% budget reduction over their approved fiscal year 2025 allocations.

The nearly 50% cut to OCA may appear staggering, but at least half of the roughly \$12 million in offsets represents security funding transferred to another department's ledger. Interim County Administrator Jesse Dickerman said Sept. 2 the actual cut to his department was closer to around \$3 million.

The brunt of that cut will be felt by OCA's Research and Analysis Division, Dickerman said. The county is anticipating the complete dissolution of its research division in fiscal year 2026.

"We had to face the choice of either cutting all of the teams, and reducing all of the capability across our divisions, or focusing them in one place," Dickerman said. "We chose the latter, not because we don't value the work that the RAD team does. It's been invaluable over the years. I think that capability will be sorely missed when it's gone."

Engineering, which saw the cuts to its budget nearly double from around around \$3.5 million to roughly \$7 million throughout the various iterations of the county's budget, will defer or delay the timelines for certain building maintenance schedules



and put renovation projects on the back burner, County Engineer Milton said at a Sept. 4 budget hearing.

**TOP EARNERS:** The top 10 Harris County government employees earn nearly \$4 million combined. See who they are.

The impact to programs provided by DEEO will largely come in the form of cuts to temporary staffing and the termination of ARPA-funded programs, many of which have already hit the goals set when they were funded.

Universal Services, which runs IT and fleet maintenance for the county, divides its budget into three categories: maintenance, enhancement and innovation. Executive Director Sindhu Menon said Sept. 5 that the combined \$6.4 million reduction to its IT and fleet budgets would have the highest impact on its ability to innovate and enhance county processes.

Another important factor that's emerged in the county's budget process is the implementation of a hiring freeze for fiscal year 2026. While the impact to departments will be dependent on the turnover they experience in the coming year, departments like Pollution Control, which has had a historically high vacancy rate, are expected to feel the pinch more than smaller departments and those with less turnover.

## Judge driving controversy

Commissioners' struggle over control of the budget narrative has made determining the impact of the county's budget especially difficult this year. Sims attributed the heightened tensions to Hidalgo's apparent refusal to maneuver in an increasingly divided political environment.

"The most important thing you have to know in politics is how to count your votes. It is No. 1. In her case, she only has to count the five — four, really," Sims said. "You either have your votes or you don't. And when you make a plea for a program, you need to make sure everybody has an understanding of what you're doing. If they tell say they can't support you, then you reconsider how you want to bring it forward."

Sims framed a previous debacle that saw dozens of children accompany Hidalgo to court in a bid to pressure commissioners to support a tax increase for early child care initiatives as an "embarrassment" tactic. That type of public pressure, Sims said, has a place in politics, but only if employed carefully with a clear strategy in mind.

Sims said Hidalgo's approach alienated her colleagues — many of whom were likely caught off guard by Hidalgo's rhetoric.

"She will hold a press conference and her colleagues don't even know what she's talking about," Sims said. "A lot of times in this particular budget process, she has made announcements and not kept them in the loop."

Hidalgo recently announced her decision not to seek another term, marking a looming end to the judge's two-term tenure as Harris County's executive. Although she does not intend to run for re-election, she has pledged to continue her crusade for a package of early child care initiatives — which, without additional funding, are slated to end at the end of 2025.

Commissioners are expected to finalize the fiscal year 2026 budget at Thursday's meeting.

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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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