

## Case Study

# How Hidalgo County District Clerk, Laura Hinojosa, Breaks Barriers to Preserve and Digitize Court Files

**Preserving and digitizing court files, including Charles Harrelson's, to build public awareness of the irreplaceable stories at the Hidalgo County District Clerk's office**



**Laura Hinojosa**  
District Clerk

Laura Hinojosa has served as Hidalgo County, TX, District Clerk since 2007 and is currently in her fifth term. Her passion for volunteer work and her parent's strong lineage of public service inspired her to run for office after dedicating 12 years as a stay-at-home mom. Hidalgo County is the seventh most populous county in Texas and one of the fastest growing in the United States.



## Committed to improving the District Clerk's office and learning from peers

When Laura Hinojosa was elected, she admittedly didn't have much experience in the role. However, she immediately started learning the job from peers and meeting with judges in her county for input. She visited six larger Texas counties, shadowing their clerks and taking in all the ways she could improve her office and preserve, digitize, and bring greater public transparency to the records in her custody.

“

“I reached out to the six larger counties and started visiting those offices, looking at what they were doing, how they were built, and then started generating ideas. Not only did I meet with those clerks, but I reached out to various sitting judges in Hidalgo County asking for their input as far as what they wanted to see and what they felt needed improvement in the office,” said Laura Hinojosa



## In-house court records scanning produced low-quality digital images

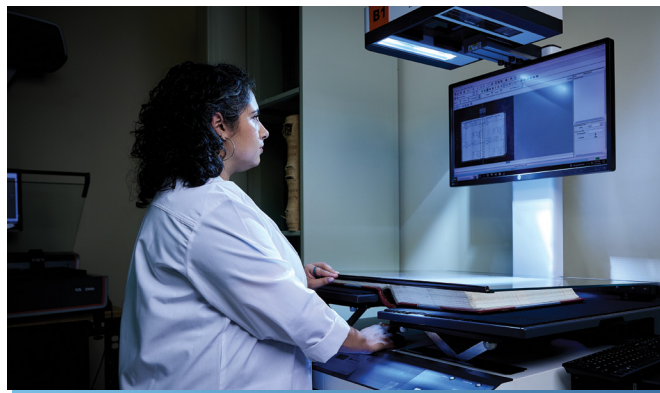
Ms. Hinojosa's commitment to continued progress for her office led her to take on improving the digitization of court records. Hidalgo County started scanning court records in 2006, but the work to digitize records had long been considered an undesirable task for in-house staff. The resulting images were low quality and often crooked.

“

Hidalgo County started scanning documents in 2006, and nobody was auditing how those files were scanned. The files didn't have complete pages, they were crooked, and the staff who were scanning at that time felt it was a low-level position in the office,” said Laura Hinojosa.

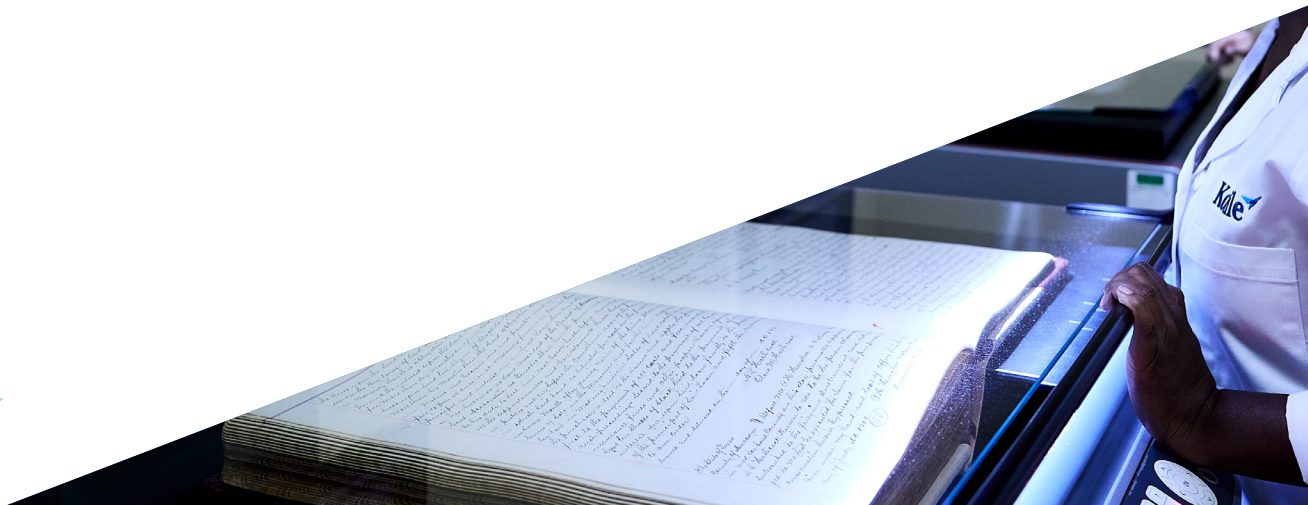
## Breaking barriers to generate funding for records digitization projects

She delved deeper into the quality issues with in-house scanning and learned her office didn't have the funds for proper digitization. At the time, district clerks couldn't collect filing fees like their county clerk counterparts. Instead of accepting the status quo, Ms. Hinojosa spearheaded an initiative to enact a new law allowing district clerks to collect fees. With her extensive connections from volunteering and experience rallying the community, she quickly got the support of other counties, local leaders, and the County and District Clerks' Association of Texas (CDCAT) to pass the SB1685 law on June 19, 2009.



“

I was learning about what needed to be done when we first came into office. I realized county clerks could collect a fee that helped with preservation and digitization, but district clerks couldn't. All that volunteer work helped me have success and establish relationships with our local delegation, so it was easy for me to pick up the phone and talk to our state senator and state reps, have meetings, and show them numbers. It was great when the CDCAT saw what was happening; they jumped in, and we got it passed to collect \$5 per filing,” said Laura Hinojosa.



# Partnering with Kofile to preserve and digitize court records

Several years of collecting filing fees later, Laura Hinojosa was ready to digitize court records properly. However, old and deteriorating court records required preservation before digitization. She partnered with Kofile to preserve and digitize court records in her custody based on Kofile's reputation and work with the Hidalgo County Clerk's office. But first, she had to get approval from the commissioners court. Ms. Hinojosa presented the commissioners with before and after images of Kofile's work done through the Hidalgo County Clerk to showcase the value of preservation and digitization.

“

I literally took carts to commissioners court to show them and give them a visual of the dire need of court records that we had here in Hidalgo County and then showing them what the transformation would look like with Kofile,” said Laura Hinojosa.

## Assessing the state of records in her custody and co-creating a treatment and care plan

After receiving approval from the commissioners court, Kofile visited the Hidalgo County District Clerk's warehouse for an inventory and assessment of the records and co-created a treatment and care plan with Ms. Hinojosa and her staff to start digitizing newer court records first.

“

We had Kofile go to our warehouse and start looking at what we had. Nothing had ever been destroyed. Everything was just piling up, so we had thousands of boxes, each with anywhere from 20 to 30 files. We started looking at finances together and what we could do and decided to start scanning the newer records because we knew people were going to come in asking for those, and we wanted to have the digital version available,” said Laura Hinojosa

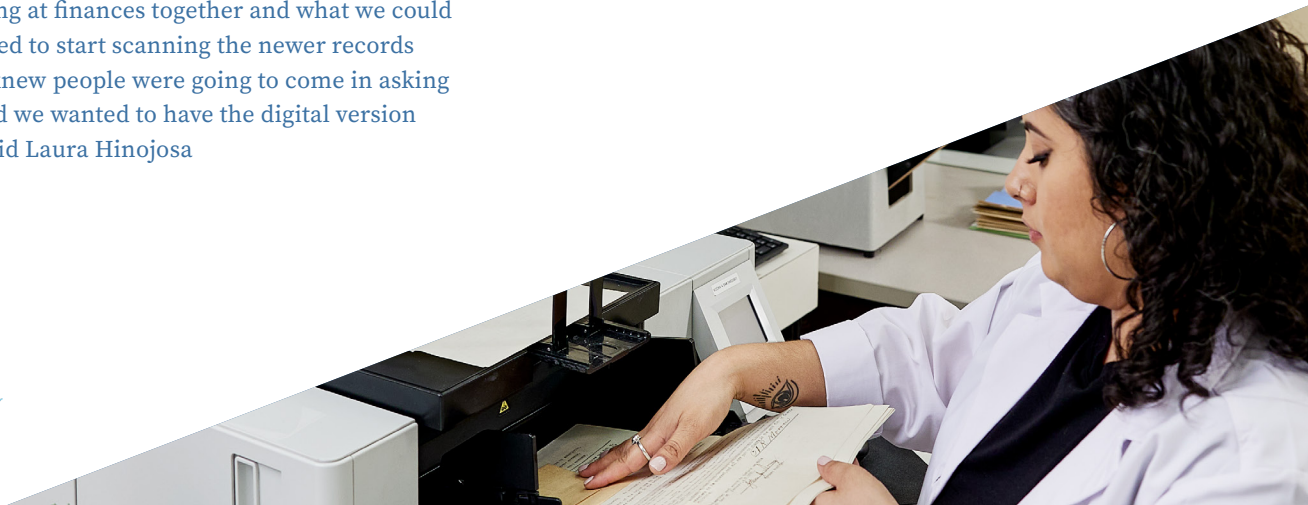
## Uncovering hidden stories and case records under her watch

As Laura Hinojosa and her staff have continued to preserve and digitize court records, she's stumbled upon case files she didn't know she had. Hidden in the basement in an inconspicuous box at the Hidalgo County District Clerk's office were the notorious case files of Charles Harrelson (father of Woody Harrelson), publicized by Spotify's Son of a Hitman podcast. The box housed not only the case files but also a real gun. Originally believed to be the actual gun used in the murder of a federal judge, Ms. Hinojosa uncovered that the gun was a replica used as a prop in court through her connections.

“

My husband is a lawyer and his mentor was one of the prosecutors in the case. We found out that the gun was not the actual gun used. The actual gun was broken apart, and they never found it. This gun was used as a prop in court and given to the district clerk as an exhibit,” said Laura Hinojosa.

After preserving and digitizing the original case files with Kofile, Ms. Hinojosa hopes to display the files and gun at a historical museum to educate the public and provide greater access.





# Unmatched quality and partnership with Kofile to continue preserving and digitizing records

Since partnering with Kofile, Ms. Hinojosa has built a strong relationship with the team. She appreciates the accessibility of every person, the quality of the work, and the transparent pricing that enables her to get an accurate budget estimate.

“

Our experience with Kofile has been nothing but stellar. Our sales rep is assigned to us, but everyone on the team is so accessible, and I can pick up the phone and talk to anyone. I'm always able to contact someone at Kofile if we need something,” said Laura Hinojosa.

## The unmatched quality of Kofile's solutions and services are second to none

The quality of Kofile's digitization solution is unmatched, according to Ms. Hinojosa. She believes no other provider offers the same level of quality and prefers to save her funds to partner with Kofile rather than use an alternative scanning company.

“

The work that Kofile does is second to none. I'd much rather save tax pay dollars and invest it in the highest quality product that will be around for generations to come versus going with anyone else to try and get things scanned cheaply and quickly,” said Laura Hinojosa.

## Kofile's auditing process and pricing transparency help Laura Hinojosa plan for future projects

Ms. Hinojosa also appreciates the pricing transparency Kofile provides to give her and her staff a realistic budget to work towards for future preservation and digitization projects.

“

The auditing process that Kofile goes through is incredible. When the files return, we can audit the work and discuss with my Kofile rep what we're finding and need to do to move on to the next project. We get quotes from her or her team that are very realistic to give us a goal to hit to save money to do more preservation and digitization. Our eyes are sometimes larger than our budget, but the quality's worth the wait,” said Laura Hinojosa.



# What's next for Laura Hinojosa? Building public awareness of the irreplaceable stories and records in her custody.

Laura Hinojosa believes the stories and court records in her custody are works of art, and she plans to market them and make them more accessible for citizens and future generations to enjoy.

“

We haven't done a lot of marketing of our preservation and digitization projects, but we plan to market this and let constituents know what we have. We have kids coming through the courthouse and into the office, where we show them the books. It's funny because we have fascinating stories of people arrested for cattle wrestling or not keeping their houses clean enough in these old books. A lot of these are in cursive handwriting that younger generations don't learn anymore, and they are beautiful works of art that we must preserve and showcase to the public,” said Laura Hinojosa.



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