

2012

Pro Bono and Legal Services Awards



Each year, the State Bar of Texas Committee on Legal Services to the Poor in Civil Matters selects the winners of the Pro Bono and Legal Services Awards, which are presented at the State Bar Annual Meeting. Following are the profiles of the 2012 award winners, who go above and beyond to provide access to justice for low-income Texans.

You can help increase access to civil legal services by making a contribution to the State Bar of Texas Access to Justice Fund, which supports programs that provide free civil legal services to the poor in Texas. Attorneys may include a contribution with their annual dues statement or contribute through MyBarPage (texasbar.com/mybarpage).

Frank J. Scurlock Award



John O'Connor

Weil, Gotshal & Manges, L.L.P., Dallas

For three months last year, John O'Connor, a litigation associate at Weil, Gotshal & Manges, L.L.P. in Dallas, was on loan to the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program (DVAP). It was his participation in Weil's "Lend-A-Lawyer" program — along with his other pro bono commitments, like serving on the firm's Pro Bono Committee — that helped earn O'Connor the 2012 Frank J. Scurlock Award, an accolade given each year to an individual attorney who has provided outstanding pro bono work.

Through the "Lend-A-Lawyer" program, O'Connor was able to work full-time for DVAP, spending August through October 2011 representing indigent clients in a variety of cases. The program, now in its seventh year, provides a full-time attorney for a three-month period to perform pro bono legal services on-site at DVAP, while the firm continues to pay the attorney's full salary and benefits.

During the last two years, O'Connor has billed more than 600 pro bono hours. One case in particular stands out to him. Recently, he helped a client obtain a final judgment against a car dealership that sold her a broken car. "It seems like a small thing, but to my client, it meant a great deal. It meant getting back to work," O'Connor said.

Within his firm, O'Connor makes a concerted effort to mentor other lawyers working on pro bono cases, and he believes in the benefits of pro bono work for young attorneys. "From an associate's perspective, it's a great opportunity to work on client relations and gain practical experience," he said. "And, it's a plus to work for a firm like Weil that emphasizes pro bono work, while at the same time getting to work with a great organization like DVAP that is dedicated to bringing justice to all Texans." — *E.C.*

J. Chrys Dougherty Legal Services Award

If you ask Mickey Baden about who's responsible for the success of the Houston Bar Foundation Veterans Legal Initiative (VLI), he is quick to sing the praises of the program's volunteer attorneys. ("I'm not a one-man show," he said.)

But, ask anybody else and they'll tell you Baden is the reason the VLI has gained traction among both veterans and volunteers. "Mickey's true gift lies in how he relates to the veterans and to the organizations and agencies that serve them," said Alistair Dawson, a partner in Beck, Redden & Secrest, L.L.P. and 2010–11 chair of the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program.

Baden, the VLI director, has worked hard to ensure that the initiative has gained a strong reputation among veterans and veteran service providers in Harris and surrounding counties. Since 2008, the program has administered a weekly legal clinic at Houston's Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and other monthly clinics. Since Baden's arrival in 2010, the number of veterans assisted has increased by 52 percent and the number of attorneys volunteering has increased by 62 percent.

Baden has become a constant presence on the in-patient floors of the Medical Center, where he assists veterans and their families with many legal issues and has been known to make home visits. "I prefer to go out and meet someone rather than talk to them on the phone," he said.

For his efforts, Baden is a recipient of this year's J. Chrys Dougherty Legal Services Award, which recognizes an outstanding legal services staff attorney. He says it is an honor to do his job. "Our clients are eternally grateful for our help — it's an incredible thing to know that we are making a difference in their lives." — *P.G.*



Mickey Baden
Houston Bar Foundation
Veterans Legal Initiative

Julie Balovich, a recipient of the 2012 J. Chrys Dougherty Legal Services Award, calls herself a "regular legal aid lawyer." An attorney in Texas RioGrande Legal Aid's (TRLA) Alpine office, she handles a mix of cases. "Guardianships, probate, domestic violence — whatever is urgent that comes through our door," Balovich said.

Some high-profile cases have walked through Balovich's door. In 2008, Balovich was part of a team that successfully represented 38 women from the Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado whose children were seized by the State of Texas — a time she calls the most intense five weeks of her life. More recently, Balovich obtained a favorable ruling against unconstitutional police vehicle searches from the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals in *Martinez v. State of Texas*.

"I've always been interested in helping people who are marginalized," said Balovich. "Every case I work on is rewarding, but some of the most gratifying cases are the ones with complicated, complex issues." Many of the cases Balovich takes involve multifaceted family law issues, including jurisdictional matters and undocumented victims of violence.

David Hall, executive director of TRLA in Weslaco, says that Balovich was the consensus choice of the organization's 140 attorneys for the Dougherty award nomination.

"Julie Balovich is tenacious and professional; innovative and smart; passionate and thorough," Hall said. "She works extremely hard — regularly working extra hours and weekends. She is always willing to take on that additional client whose legal rights are being trampled or the tough case that appears hopeless." — *E.C.*



Julie Balovich
Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc., Alpine

W. Frank Newton Award



Patton Boggs, L.L.P.

Dallas

At Patton Boggs, L.L.P., pro bono work is not just a passion, it's a way of life. Associates and salaried of counsel at the firm must complete 100 hours of pro bono work each year and partners are encouraged — and given incentives — to do pro bono work. From bottom to top, pro bono work has been instilled in the firm's culture for more than 30 years, said Michael Forshey, a Dallas partner and co-chair of the firm's Pro Bono Committee.

Patton Boggs' pro bono efforts led to the firm's being named recipient of the 2012 W. Frank Newton Award, which recognizes the pro bono contribution of attorney groups. In 2011, the Dallas office contributed approximately 8,000 hours of pro bono work to Dallas-area legal aid organizations. Almost 3,000 of those hours were donated to the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program.

In one example, the firm helped the family of an autistic child gain access to private education. The child previously attended a Texas public school and was physically restrained and isolated, resulting in respiratory problems that required medical attention. The family searched for help for more than a year, but was turned away by other organizations.

Then Patton Boggs and the Elizabeth Birt Center for Autism Law and Advocacy came into the picture. "Our partner who handled the case stepped in and did a fabulous job," said Forshey. "This is just one of those cases where you realize that what you are getting out of it is so much more than what you are offering. For us, pro bono work is the right thing to do and helps ensure that our partners and associates are not just good firm citizens, but also good community citizens." — *P.G.*

Pro Bono Coordinator Award



Pedro J. "Pete" Fierro

Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, Midland

If everyone in the Midland-Odessa legal community doesn't know who Pedro J. "Pete" Fierro is, then it's only a matter of time. As the Equal Justice Volunteer Coordinator for Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas' (LANWT) Midland office, Fierro is not shy when it comes to recruiting attorneys for pro bono cases. He is consistent — and often persistent — in his outreach efforts to both the public and attorneys, but his enthusiasm comes from a deep passion for helping others.

And local attorneys have responded. In 2011, 130 area attorneys (40 percent of those eligible to do pro bono work in the Midland office's six-county service area) were enrolled in the Equal Justice Volunteer Program and contributed more than 600 hours of pro bono services.

Developing such a successful program has taken a lot of hard work and commitment from Fierro, the winner of the 2012 Pro Bono Coordinator Award. Fierro started with LANWT in 2003, and, after transferring from Odessa to the Midland office in 2005, he focused on building the volunteer program there. He established a Pro Bono Advisory Board that now comprises 25 people including attorneys, paralegals, and representatives from the City of Midland and community service nonprofits. The board meets every three to four months to evaluate the pro bono program and make improvements or changes as needed.

Fierro also is dedicated to ensuring his volunteers know how appreciated they are. Every year, he hosts an annual party to recognize program volunteers for their service with plaques, awards, and city resolutions. "Whether you came to one clinic and took just one case, you helped someone," he said. "Without the volunteers, we couldn't do what we do." — *J.M.*

Judge Merrill Hartman Pro Bono Judge Award

For the past 10 years, Justice Phylis Speedlin of the Fourth Court of Appeals has been dedicated to ensuring the success of the Community Justice Program (CJP), which provides pro bono legal clinics for San Antonio's low-income citizens. For this reason, Justice Speedlin was awarded the inaugural Judge Merrill Hartman Pro Bono Judge Award. The award is named for the late Dallas judge who was a dedicated proponent of pro bono programs serving the poor.

Frustrated with the number of self-represented litigants appearing before their courts, Justice Speedlin, then serving as a district judge in San Antonio, and colleague Judge Karen Pozza decided to design a new pro bono program. The CJP was the result, a joint effort of the San Antonio Bar Association, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc., and other community organizations. Since the first clinic was held in October 2002, the program has placed more than 6,000 pro bono cases with volunteer attorneys. "We have tried to reach out to where we are needed," Justice Speedlin said.

Justice Speedlin has spent countless hours volunteering at the evening clinics, assisting in training volunteers, promoting the program to the community, and getting the local judiciary involved.

Recently, the program itself received the American Bar Association's 2012 Harrison Tweed Award, which honors bar associations that develop programs to expand access to civil legal services to the poor. "It is so gratifying and exciting to me," Justice Speedlin said. "I hope it will help spark more interest in this program in other communities." — *J.M.*



Justice Phylis Speedlin
Fourth Court of Appeals, San Antonio

Pro Bono Award

What sets the Human Rights Initiative's (HRI) William O. Holston, Jr. Pro Bono Program apart from other organizations, according to executive director Bill Holston, is that it is run like a law firm. "We try to be very efficient and competent," Holston said. "We have a very rigorous intake process and partner with the best law firms in the state and have a very high quality of volunteer lawyers."

All of the hard work has made an impression on the legal community. HRI's William O. Holston, Jr. Pro Bono Program is the recipient of the 2012 Pro Bono Award, which honors a volunteer attorney organization that has made an outstanding contribution toward helping indigent Texans access the legal system.

The program — named for Holston after a gift from Charles and Meredith Stimson, friends and former clients of Holston's — provides free legal services to indigent immigrant survivors of human rights abuses and violent crime. The program, which has 10 staff members, counts on approximately 200 volunteer attorneys and serves Dallas, Tarrant, and surrounding counties.

Holston is quick to credit his staff with the program's success. "Our staff is the best," he said. "We work every day to be good stewards of the cases we are given." Those cases include asylum cases from more than 40 countries.

Holston recalls one case where he represented an Ethiopian human rights activist who had been jailed and tortured on three separate occasions. "When I asked him why he persisted when he knew what would happen, he got tears in his eyes and said, 'I understand this is the price of freedom,'" Holston said. "That really hit home for me. That's what we're working for."

— *E.C.*



**Human Rights Initiative's
William O. Holston, Jr.
Pro Bono Program**
Dallas