

Legal Services to the Poor in Civil Matters Committee 2021 Pro Bono Excellence Awards

Frank J. Scurlock Award

The Frank J. Scurlock Award honors an individual attorney, in good standing, who has provided outstanding pro bono work. The award is named for the late Frank J. Scurlock, the first chair of the Legal Services to the Poor in Civil Matters Committee. Scurlock was known for his tireless efforts to provide legal services to the poor.

Lynn Rodriguez (Fort Worth)

Lynn represents low-income and no-income military veterans, and guides students in doing this work as well. Lynn teaches students substantive law and skills at the Family and Veterans Advocacy Clinic of the Texas A&M University School of Law.

Lynn makes regular visits to the Veterans Affairs Resource Center in Fort Worth, where she gives legal advice to homeless and near-homeless veterans, and she conducts intake for those who need further help from the Law School Clinic. She also collaborates with allied agencies to organize and conduct community education sessions on legal issues.

In the evening, Lynn is often on the telephone. She may be answering questions as a volunteer with LegalLine, a twice-monthly Tarrant County Bar Association (TCBA) hotline for legal questions, or advising another attorney on a veteran's legal issue. She has been recognized by TCBA for her work in mentoring others and in staffing LegalLine.

Lynn also contributes time to the organizations she helps to lead. She is President of the Veterans Coalition of Tarrant County and serves on the boards of the Tarrant County Chapter of Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans and Tarrant County LegalLine. Lynn actively works pro bono for both the Tarrant County Bar Association and the State Bar of Texas. She has been awarded the Eagle Service Award by Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans (TLTV), a State Bar initiative.

J. Chrys Dougherty Award

The J. Chrys Dougherty Award recognizes an outstanding legal services staff attorney. The award is named for J. Chrys Dougherty, a private attorney and Bar leader, whose efforts helped to build a strong working partnership between the State Bar of Texas and legal services providers. The award includes a \$1,500 stipend from the Texas Bar Foundation and a contribution from Graves, Dougherty, Hearon & Moody.

Dana Karni (Houston)

Dana created the Eviction Right to Counsel in July 2020 and currently manages this program within Lone Star Legal Aid. The program focuses on eviction mitigation and prevention across the Houston area. Through the program, Dana has provided counsel to thousands of individuals across Harris County and Houston.

Judge Merrill Hartman Award

The Judge Merrill Hartman Pro Bono Judge Award honors a judge, sitting or retired, who has provided exemplary pro bono service, including: outreach to attorneys to increase the quantity and quality of pro bono representation; modifications to court processes to increase access to justice; advocacy on behalf of access to justice; or service as a volunteer judge for pro bono clinics or other pro bono proceedings. The award is named after the late Judge Merrill Hartman of Dallas, a tireless advocate for low-income communities' access to justice.

Justice Gina Benavides (Corpus Christi)

Justice Gina M. Benavides was first elected to the Thirteenth Court of Appeals in 2006 and took office in January of 2007. She was re-elected in 2012 and 2018. She is currently the Senior Justice on the Court. During her tenure as an appellate judge, Justice Benavides has authored more than 1500 opinions on issues involving civil and criminal matters.

In 2017, Justice Benavides was appointed as a board member of the Texas Legal Services Center, a non-profit that provides free attorney representation, legal advice, and information to low-income Texans. Justice Benavides' leadership has been invaluable to Texas Legal Services Center—most especially, during this difficult year of new challenges to navigate with a deadly pandemic and devastating economic downturn that created even greater hurdles for already vulnerable clients.

In 2010, the Texas Supreme Court appointed Justice Benavides to the Texas Access for Justice Commission and re-appointed her in 2012. The Texas Access to Justice Commission was created by the Supreme Court of Texas in 2001 to develop and implement initiatives to expand access to and enhance the quality of justice in civil matters for low-income citizens. Although Justice Benavides' term has ended, she continues to serve as a member of the Commission's Legislative Committee.

In February 2012, then-State Bar of Texas President Bob Black appointed Justice Benavides to the Solutions 2012 task force to deal with decreasing funding for legal access, increasing pro se litigants, and the effect it has on our legal system.

Justice Benavides also serves in an active role in the Hispanic Issues Section of the State Bar of Texas. In 2018, she was elected Chair of the Section. In 2014, the Hispanic Issues Section named her "Judge of the Year" at the Section's annual meeting. When Justice Benavides learned that the economic downturn and crashing interest rates would impact IOLTA dollars needed by legal aid, she worked tirelessly with the Hispanic Issues Section to create the Lawteria fundraiser. This event successfully raised over \$40,000 to provide legal help to some of the most vulnerable Texans who were impacted by COVID-19.

Pro Bono Award

The Pro Bono Award honors a volunteer attorney organization (e.g., legal aid organization, local bar association, non-profit organization) that has made an outstanding contribution toward guaranteeing access to the legal system by the poor.

Lone Star Legal Aid (Houston)

Lone Star Legal Aid (LSLA) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit law firm founded in 2002. It is the fourth largest free legal aid provider in the United States and has approximately 380 employees. It serves approximately 60,000 square miles, one-third of the state, including 72 counties in the eastern and Gulf Coast regions of Texas, and 4 Arkansas counties. LSLA is led by Paul Furrh, Jr. and funded by Legal Service Corporation, Texas Access to Justice Foundation, Greater Houston Community Foundation, Texas Veterans Commission, American Red Cross, etc.

272 volunteer attorneys and approximately 50 non-attorney volunteers work with LSLA's pro bono program. 1981 hours of volunteer services have been donated through the program. As a result of COVID-19, the Pro Bono program adjusted its programming. Of particular note, LSLA launched its law school partnership program with Baylor School of Law and St. Mary's. The law students are partnered with practicing alumni.

Pro Bono Coordinator Award

The Pro Bono Coordinator Award is presented to an individual who has made an exceptional contribution to the delivery of, and access to legal services for the poor, while serving as the pro bono coordinator for a volunteer attorney organization or group, local bar association, law firm, law school, corporate legal office, governmental law department, or legal services organization. Attorney and non-attorney pro bono coordinators are eligible and may self-nominate.

Lena Engelage (Conroe)

Lena Engelage is a new Pro Bono Litigation Coordinator who has helped to re-energize the Pro Bono Team at Lone Star Legal Aid (LSLA) – Conroe Office. As COVID-19 threatened to halt services to the most vulnerable members of the community, Lena tirelessly pursued innovative ways to serve clients when in person contact was no longer possible.

Lena worked to establish remote legal clinics, which provided an avenue for clients to receive service throughout LSLA's service area, which includes over 72 counties, while providing volunteers the opportunity to serve in a convenient and safe way. Remote legal clinics allowed pro bono coordinators the flexibility to recruit volunteers from all over the state because location was no longer an obstacle.

Lena worked to establish new partnerships, including partnerships with law schools. Lena works to coordinate volunteer opportunities with the pro bono coordinators at the Woodlands Bar Association and the Montgomery County Bar Association. Lena also partnered with private attorneys for online presentations, which allowed the information to be disseminated more broadly and gave local attorneys the opportunity to showcase their knowledge.

In her short time at LSLA, Lena has founded and/or helped to coordinate the Advanced Planning Project, the Divorce Pro Se Project, the Pro Bono Team Monthly Facebook Live Project, and the Remote Legal Clinic (formerly, the in person MCLAC clinic). In 2021, Lena plans to continue these projects while implementing new guardianship clinics, and an eviction project. These projects have been especially beneficial in the rural communities LSLA serves, where resources including volunteers are often nonexistent. The projects have also increased cost effective service opportunities as well as cost-effective delivery methods.

Pro Bono Support Staff Award

The Pro Bono Support Staff Award recognizes the outstanding and exemplary contributions of non-attorney volunteers such as paralegals, administrative assistants, interpreters, and other support staff who work on pro bono projects. The award promotes the awareness of pro bono activities that non-attorneys can participate in and encourages non-attorneys who work in the legal profession to volunteer their time and specialty skills to pro bono projects within their community. To qualify for this award, an individual must provide legal assistance, without compensation, in a non-mandatory program, that requires specific legal skills, knowledge, or training, under the supervision of a licensed attorney or qualified organization. Services may be provided through such organizations as, but not limited to, legal aid programs, community legal clinics, bar associations, courts, or government agencies.

Shanna Mello (Weatherford)

Shanna is a paralegal at Eggleston King, LLP. She donates her time coordinating and leading a free Teen Court program in Parker County, which encompasses a population of over 125,000 and multiple Justice of the Peace, and Municipal Courts. This free alternative program allows teenagers to dispose of their class C misdemeanors through serving jury duty within the Teen Court program and completing

community service hours thus giving back to the community. The program also offers opportunities for students who are seeking community service hours for organizations such as National Honor Society to serve as prosecuting and defense attorneys, bailiffs or jurors. Teens are exposed to the judicial system in a safe, caring environment.

Shanna speaks to organizations such as Rotary and Chamber of Commerce, on a monthly basis regarding the benefits of Teen Court. She coordinates local attorneys to mentor the volunteers and preside as judges, follows up with community service performance and drafts all paperwork for filing with the referring court for disposition.

Shanna has been donating her time to Parker County Teen Court for 10 years. She has also been actively involved in the State Bar of Texas, Paralegal Division by serving on the Board and leading several significant committees for 10 years.

W. Frank Newton Award

The W. Frank Newton Award recognizes the pro bono contribution of attorney groups (e.g., law firm, corporate law department, government attorney office, law school faculty, Bar section) whose members have made an outstanding contribution in the provision of, or access to, legal services to the poor. The award is named for W. Frank Newton, former Dean of Texas Tech University School of Law and long-time pro bono advocate.

SMU Dedman School of Law; COVID-19 Legal Helpline (Dallas)

In early May 2020, the COVID-19 Legal Helpline Project Coordinator, Professor Mary Spector, solicited assistance from outside agencies and helped to write grant applications for funding the project. Working with the Director of Public Service and the Assistant Dean of Students, she selected the students to participate in the program, trained 45 law students, assigned shifts, and conducted some troubleshooting along the way. Working with the Director of Public Service, she coordinated referrals to and from outside organizations. She directed two Civil/Consumer Clinic Staff Attorneys who served as supervisors to the students. 12 law students volunteered their time for some portion or all of their work on this project and were able to earn public service credits towards their 30-credit graduation requirement. 80 volunteer attorneys participated in this project.

Operating remotely through a dedicated free legal helpline, law students conducted intake interviews of callers seeking legal assistance related to the COVID-19 pandemic such as housing, immigration and consumer protection. Students then consulted with a supervising attorney (SMU law faculty) to determine the appropriate advice to provide. Callers with problems best handled by licensed attorneys were referred to private law firms or agencies providing pro bono assistance. The Helpline also served as a resource for small businesses seeking information about loan and grant programs, insurance, commercial leases, and other general business matters. The project has now been incorporated into the law school's clinical academic program, which encompasses 10 specialized clinics and projects. The Helpline has received over 2000 calls and 500 individual people have been served since June 2020. Approximately 2200 hours were donated for this project.

During spring and summer of 2020, the program director served as a member of an informal task force advising the Texas Supreme Court on three emergency orders; the Tenth, Fourteenth and Sixteenth Emergency Orders to protect litigants during the period of court closings, job loss and uncertainty.