



MY OPINION

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Texas Lawyers Partnering for Pro Bono

A row of fake ivory elephants sits in my office — a gift from a former client. I was a first-year associate, and it was my first pro bono case. I represented Teresa, who had saved for 10 years to purchase her first family home for \$58,000. On Thanksgiving Day, as she sat at the dinner table with her family, she noticed what looked like tape peeling off her walls. Under the tape and flaking paint was a crack. Within a few weeks, there were peeling strips of tape all over her home revealing large cracks further hidden by a fresh coat of paint.

Documents and depositions later revealed that the seller and inspector had conspired to hide irreparable foundation damage by taping and painting over telltale cracks. Recovering Teresa's hard-earned money and recouping her attorney's fees was the sweetest victory of my career to date. My experience resulted in a long-lasting appreciation for pro bono work.

Texas has the second-largest poverty population in the country — more than 5 million Texans live below federal poverty guidelines. Texas ranks 39th for providing legal services to the poor (based on per capita spending per poor person). The economy in the last few years has not helped. Less than 25 percent of the civil legal needs of low-income Texans are currently being met.

While there is one Texas attorney for every 322 Texas citizens, there is only one Texas legal aid attorney for every 10,838 poor Texans. We simply cannot keep up with the need. Further contributing to the need are those who do not qualify for legal aid but cannot afford legal services, either. For example, a single person who works minimum



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wage for 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year earns about \$15,000 — too much to qualify for legal aid. Our legal aid lawyers are doing all they can do — in 2009, legal aid groups in Texas closed 104,939 cases for 234,713 individuals. Clearly, we can do a better job helping our legal aid lawyers meet the growing legal needs of our fellow Texas citizens. But we have to be willing to give our time.

This month, as we recognize National Pro Bono Week (Oct. 24–30) across the state, TYLA is introducing *Partnering for Pro Bono* — a web-based sustainable program that partners in-house counsel with law firm lawyers in an effort to increase the provision of pro bono legal services in Texas. Through a series of questions, our program matches a law-firm lawyer with an in-house lawyer and then presents pro bono cases available in various geographic areas. Cases will include family law, probate, consumer, landlord-tenant, immigration, labor and employment, veterans, public benefits, and civil rights.

Partnering for Pro Bono will also highlight clinics around the state, including veterans clinics, to allow matched lawyers to volunteer in groups as well as on individual cases. The cases are available through the “New Cases” feature on TexasLawyersHelp.org, a collaboration of the access to justice community in Texas to increase the quantity and quality of legal services provided to low-

income individuals and communities by pro bono lawyers. And, because cases posted will be provided by recognized legal services providers, attorneys who accept these cases will be covered by State Bar malpractice insurance. TYLA is proud to be working with Texas Lawyers Care, the Texas Legal Services Center, the Texas Access to Justice Commission and Foundation, and various corporate counsel and law firm pro bono committees.

Partnering for Pro Bono meets the needs of both law firm and in-house counsel. While law firms struggle with fewer resources, and young lawyers feel more pressure to bill, less pro bono work is getting done. A young lawyer participating in this program will gain much-needed experience while developing long-lasting relationships with their in-house partner. While a growing number of in-house counsel want to provide pro bono services, logistical roadblocks such as time and proximity make it difficult. A partnered in-house lawyer benefits through working with a lawyer who has kept their trials skills honed, has a more flexible schedule, and likely has additional secretarial and paralegal resources. All lawyers providing pro bono work can earn up to five hours of CLE credit by being a mentor or mentee and may qualify for TexasBarCLE tuition waivers. Attorneys who provide 75 hours or more of pro bono representation can become a member of the State Bar Pro Bono College.

By bringing together lawyers, and their resources, TYLA hopes to increase the number of pro bono cases handled on a yearly basis. Please join our effort at tyla.org/partneringforprobono! ☆