



## *From Vision to Impact:* **25 YEARS OF THE TEXAS ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION**

**AS TEXAS STOOD AT THE DOOR TO THE 21ST CENTURY, A PLANNING GROUP SURVEYED THE STATE OF LEGAL SERVICES TO THE POOR AND FOUND IT LACKING.** Far too many Texans were underrepresented in civil legal matters, and efforts to provide needed funding for representation were well meaning but uncoordinated. Perhaps most critical, no single group had ultimate responsibility for making progress on these issues.

Fortunately, the planning group offered solutions. Chief among them: to create an umbrella organization for efforts to expand access to justice in civil matters in Texas. The State Bar of Texas Board of Directors endorsed the concept, and by order of the Supreme Court of Texas, on April 26, 2001, the Texas Access to Justice Commission was born. This month marks the commission's 25th year of fulfilling the critical role of statewide organizer and cheerleader of efforts to ensure income is not a barrier for Texans who need civil legal help. As president of the State Bar this year, I've committed my term to helping to close the justice-access gap, so I'm devoting this month's column to highlighting the commission's exemplary record of moving us closer to that goal.

Unlike the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, the commission does not directly fund the provision of legal services. Under the Supreme Court of Texas' 2001 order, the 15-member commission works to develop and implement initiatives designed to expand access to—and enhance the quality of—justice for low-income Texans. This work includes educating lawmakers about access to justice issues, developing initiatives to lower barriers to the justice system, and coordinating with legal service providers, pro bono volunteers, and other stakeholders across Texas to better serve the public.

The commission's Justice For All Campaign encourages Texas lawyers to donate \$150 or more for access to justice through their annual dues statements. Its Law Firm Competition recognizes firms that raise money for civil legal aid organizations, and its Champion of Justice Society recognizes individual donors for above-and-beyond giving.

One of the commission's signature events is the annual Champions of Justice Gala, which raises funds to help low-income Texas veterans access civil legal services. The event, co-sponsored by the State Bar, has raised more than \$7.4 million since its inception in 2010. This year's event is scheduled for April 30 at the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin. For information, go to [texasatj.org/champions-of-justice-gala/](http://texasatj.org/champions-of-justice-gala/). And the commission's recently established Take One campaign, which encourages lawyers to take one low-income veteran's case per year in their legal specialty, is just the latest example of these leaders adapting to meet our state's needs. Through these and other efforts, the commission is making a real difference in the lives of countless Texans. Still, the work continues.

In recent months, the commission has unveiled a new website, a new strategic plan, and a new executive director, Nina Hess Hsu, whom many may know from her former role as general counsel for the Supreme Court of Texas. Under the leadership of Chair Harriet Miers, her fellow commissioners, and the commission's dedicated staff, the commission is well positioned for the next 25 years.

So, this month, we mark the commission's anniversary not only to honor its work, but also as a reminder of why the commission exists—the reality that too many Texans find legal help to be out of reach, simply because they can't afford it. As members of the Texas legal community, we all have a part to play in closing the justice gap, and we can be grateful we have an organization like the Texas Access to Justice Commission to lead the way.

### **SANTOS VARGAS**

President, 2025-2026  
 State Bar of Texas