

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
The Affiliate

Texas Lawyers Partnering for Pro Bono

By Jennifer Evans Morris

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, a grandmother and family matriarch who had saved for ten years to purchase her first family home for \$58,000. I remember her telling me how she sat at the dinner table with her family on Thanksgiving Day a few months after they had moved into the home. She was thankful and proud to have her home. That day, however, she looked up on the wall and saw what looked like tape peeling off her walls. Under the tape and flaking paint was a crack. A long one. Within a few weeks there were peeling strips of tape revealing large cracks further hidden by a fresh coat of paint all over her home.

Documents and depositions later revealed that the seller and inspector had conspired to hide irreparable foundation damage by taping and painting over telltale cracks all over the house. Recovering Teresa's hard-earned money and recouping her attorney's fees was the sweetest victory of my career to date.

The Benefits

Through the course of Teresa's case I learned to hire experts, take depositions, handle a mediation, strategize, and generally litigate a case on my own. I gained confidence and skills that serve me today. I also enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing I had made a specific and tangible difference in someone's life. My experience resulted in a long-lasting appreciation for pro bono work.

The Need

Texas is struggling with this economy along with every other state in the country. We have the second largest poverty population in the country—over 5 million Texans live below federal poverty guidelines. Providing legal aid to these Texas citizens is critical. Texas ranks 43rd for providing legal services to the poor (per capita spending per poor person). There is a misconception that deferred and out of work young lawyers are increasing the numbers of legal aid lawyers. And although some are, the fact remains that less than 25 percent of the civil legal needs of low-income Texans are currently being met. There is one Texas attorney for every 322 Texas citizens. By contrast, there is only one Texas legal-aid attorney for every 10,838 poor Texans. We simply cannot keep up with the need. 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.

A Solution—Partnering for Pro Bono

In October, as we recognized Pro Bono month across the country, the Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA) introduced *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, the TYLA program matches a law firm lawyer with an in-house lawyer and then presents available pro bono cases through legal aid providers from around the state, using www.TexasLawyersHelp.org. Available cases include family law, probate, consumer, landlord-tenant, immigration, labor and employment, veterans, public benefits, and civil rights. *Partnering for Pro Bono* also coordinates with clinics around the state, starting with the Texas State Bar's Texas Lawyers for Texas Veteran's clinics. And, because the cases posted are provided by recognized legal service providers, attorneys who accept the cases are covered by the State Bar's malpractice insurance. TYLA is proud to be working with Texas Lawyers Care, the Texas Legal Services Center, the 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 thinner resources, and young lawyers feel more pressure to bill, less pro bono work is getting done. Participating in *Partnering for Pro Bono*, however, helps a young lawyer gain much needed experience while developing long-lasting relationships with his or her in-house partner. Although a growing number of in-house counsel desire to provide pro bono services, logistical roadblocks such as time and proximity make it difficult. A partnered in-house lawyer benefits by working with a lawyer who has kept his or her trials skills honed, has a more flexible schedule, and likely has additional secretarial and paralegal resources.

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By bringing together lawyers, and their resources, the TYLA hopes to increase the number of pro bono cases handled on a yearly basis. I invite you to consider a similar project in your state.

For more information, visit www.tyla.org/partneringforprobono.

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