

Justice Report

TEXAS RIOGRANDE LEGAL AID

2020



Justice begins here.

Individual Rights Group
Project - Victims' Rights C
Law Group - Bi-National P
Public Defender Division - S
m - Community Preservation
Law Team

ts Group -
s' Rights Group - Legal Aid for Surviv
National Project - Economic and Social Justice G
Division - Southern Migrant Legal Services - T
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TEXAS RIOGRANDE LEGAL AID

JUSTICE REPORT 2020

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Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) provides free legal services to people in 68 Texas counties facing various civil matters including, but not limited to disaster assistance, family law, public benefits, employment, housing, farmworker, and civil rights. State and federal eligibility requirement apply.

TRLA thanks our supporters who make our work possible:

Legal Services Corporation

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The City of Austin

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LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION

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WHO WE ARE



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Every day at TRLA, we meet the most vulnerable among us, listen to their struggles, and try our best to help them obtain justice. As you can imagine, it is impossible to strike down all the unfair barriers inherent in our legal systems; but with your help, we are able to find every opportunity to push for changes large and small that improve thousands of lives– and even save them.

With 2020 being a planetary disaster, we stayed on the job to continue safely and effectively helping our client communities, leaning much more on technology, and ramping up our digital outreach.

Rental relief programs and a series of CDC (Center for Disease Control) moratoria on evictions were enacted to keep people housed. Still, they mean little without the education of tenants and the tenacious advocacy we brought to bear against resistant landlords.

As the number of jobless Texans soared, we challenged the denial of unemployment benefits, protected workers against unscrupulous debt collectors, and fought for people whose employers forced them to work in high-risk conditions.

Summer approached and the country came together to push for answers and action on justice reform. Our Public Defenders tirelessly advocated for clients - holding law enforcement accountable to the constitution, fighting for those held in COVID-ridden jails simply because they were poor, and ensuring that all defendants in jeopardy of incarceration have the right to comprehensive and conscientious representation.

While most of our work could not happen without support from our institutional funders, this assistance comes with barriers and limitations. Your individual donations provide leverage to help us serve as many people as we can with unyielding tenacity and commitment to justice.

In short, your support allows us to provide the full range of services our client community needs, and our work would not be possible without you. Join us in the fight and make your donation today.

Thank you,



Robert Doggett
Executive Director



OFFICES

Alpine

114 N. Sixth St.
Alpine, TX 79830

Austin

4920 North I-35
Austin, TX 78751

Beeville

Bee County Regional Public Defender
331A N. Washington St.
Beeville, TX 78102

Brownsville

1206 E. Van Buren St.
Brownsville, TX 78520

Corpus Christi – Courthouse

901 Leopard St.
Corpus Christi, TX 78401

Corpus Christi – Pueblo

3825 Agnes St.
Corpus Christi, TX 78405

Del Rio

902 E. 11th St.
Del Rio, TX 78841

Eagle Pass

542 E. Main St.
Eagle Pass TX 78852

Edinburg

316 South Closner Blvd.
Edinburg, TX 78539

El Paso

1331 Texas Ave.
El Paso, TX 79901

Floresville

Atascosa Regional Public Defender
1019 B St. #C
Floresville, TX 78114

Hallettsville

Lavaca County Public Defender
200 W. 4th St.
Hallettsville, TX 77964

Harlingen

Willacy County Public Defender
308 E. Harrison Ave.
Harlingen, TX 78550

Jourdanton

Atascosa Regional Public Defender
1501 Campbell Avenue
Jourdanton, TX 78026

Laredo

1702 Convent Ave.
Laredo, TX 78040

Mercedes

301 S. Texas
Mercedes, TX 78570

Southern Migrant Legal Services (SMLS)

311 Plus Park Blvd., Suite 135
Nashville, TN 37217

Rio Grande City

Starr Regional Public Defender
310 E. Mirasoles St.
Rio Grande City, TX 78582

San Antonio

1111 N. Main Ave.
San Antonio, TX 78212

Sinton

113 E. Sinton St.
Sinton, TX 78387

Victoria

121 S. Main St., Suite 100
Victoria, TX 7790

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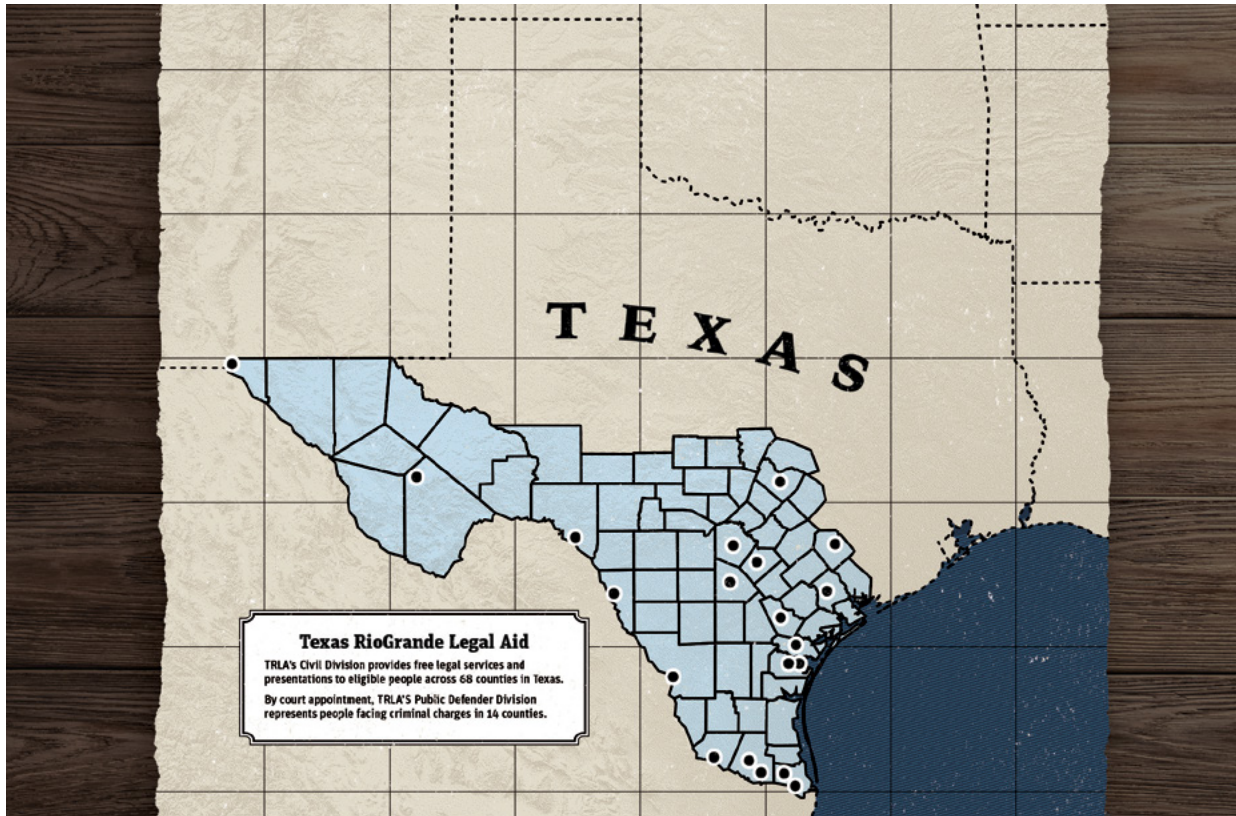
Hidalgo County Bar Association

Diana Torres

El Centro Del Barrio

Michael Wyatt

El Paso Bar Association



OVERVIEW

Created in 2002, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) was initially formed to provide civil legal services to poor people – specifically farmworkers – in 10 South Texas counties. Through its half-century of dedication to increasing access to justice, TRLA’s legal service has expanded to now cover 68 Southwest Texas counties. Our continuing work with migrant and seasonal farmworkers now extends across all of Texas and has expanded into Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

Early on, we recognized the need to safeguard the access to and fairness of representation for anyone accused of a crime. Thus began TRLA’s Public Defender Division, which we have operated for the past 14 years.

TRLA currently covers one-third of the entire US/Mexico border.

“Back in those early days, it became really apparent to me that, if you were going to advocate on behalf of a community of poor people, it was critically important to advocate in all the courtrooms, civil and criminal.”

David Hall
Executive Director (1975-2017)



PRACTICE GROUPS + SPECIAL PROJECTS

The **Community Preservation and Empowerment Group** advocates for individuals, communities, neighborhood nonprofits, and others. Attorneys handle legal areas that combat systemic inequity, discrimination, and segregation through the environmental justice, community development and colonias and real estate teams.

The **Domestic Violence and Family Law Group** provides civil legal assistance, including divorces and protective orders, to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. The Group's attorneys and social workers collaborate with domestic violence programs, rape crisis centers and other social service agencies to provide trauma informed holistic services with the goals of safety and self-sufficiency for survivors of abuse and their children. The Group's **Bi-National Project** works to assist low-income survivors of domestic violence with international custody disputes with the goal of keeping children with or returning children to their non-abusive parent.

The **Economic and Social Justice Group** advocates for advocates for low-income individuals in matters that threaten their economic stability and social welfare in areas including consumer law, guardianships, elder law, wills and estates, tax law, re-entry for formerly incarcerated people, micro-enterprises and torts and civil litigation.

The **Housing Group** protects the rights of low-income tenants and homeowners to keep people in their homes. It defends tenants facing eviction, works on behalf of public housing

residents, represents families facing illegal housing discrimination, and protects families at risk of losing their homestead because they can't pay property taxes.

The **Individual Rights Group** focuses on ensuring the civil rights and liberties of individuals of those systemically oppressed in our society are upheld. The Group specializes in Immigration Law, Disability Rights, Education Law, Juvenile Justice, Native American Rights, and supports disaster survivors in recovery through the Disaster Benefits Team.

The **Labor & Employment Group** represents low-wage workers in a broad variety of cases, including claims for unpaid minimum and overtime wages; unlawful discrimination and harassment; family, medical, and pregnancy leave (violations of the Family and Medical Leave Act, FMLA); workers' compensation; unemployment insurance appeals; human trafficking cases; and other claims under federal and state law. The team also represents workers who have faced retaliation for trying to exercise their rights at work. The **Farmworker Law Team** enforces agricultural workers' rights to promised wages and safe working conditions and conducts broad outreach to advise workers of their legal protection.

The **Mental Health Program** helps low-income people with serious mental illness create self-determination plans that serve their psychiatric needs in the least restrictive manner possible while assisting with other civil legal needs.

The **Public Benefits Group** uses a two-pronged approach of education and legal advocacy to help families and individuals obtain and maintain the income, nutritional, and medical assistance to which they are entitled under state and federal law. Advocates in this group provide clients with legal representation in matters related to Public Benefits Law. The **Health Law Team** represents clients who have been wrongfully denied medical benefits, and Medical-Legal Partnerships and Medical Legal Assistance for Families are coordinated efforts between TRLA and medical providers with the mission of providing holistic services, especially to the medically needy. The **Advocacy for the Homeless Team** works with those living in homelessness, helping them access benefits and services to transition into a better life. The **Veterans Advocacy Project** works with veterans, the spouses and widows or widowers of veterans, and dependent children of veterans to obtain benefits and services that they are entitled to, as well as legal representation in other non-criminal matters.

The **Public Defender Division** represents people facing criminal charges who can't afford an attorney. The guiding principle of TRLA's Public Defender Program is all defendants in jeopardy of incarceration have the right to comprehensive and conscientious representation. Handling cases ranging from misdemeanors to felonies and appeals, the program operates in 14 South Texas counties.

Southern Migrant Legal Services (SMLS) is a Nashville-based special project of TRLA representing low-wage migrant agricultural workers who are exploited in their jobs. SMLS assists agricultural workers in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee, with employment related legal issues including employment discrimination, wage disputes, and human trafficking.

The **Texas Foster Youth Justice Project** is a statewide project which provides civil legal services for current and former foster youth. The project helps youth with various legal and administrative matters such as obtaining copies of CPS records; erasing criminal and juvenile records; and accessing foster youth benefits and programs that help in the transition from foster care to independence.

The **Victims' Rights Group** empowers victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, stalking, and teen-dating violence to plan for their safety, understand their right to privacy, and achieve their legal goals. The group supports TRLA's civil legal teams and hosts an annual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Cross-Training, a state-wide conference for legal advocates about developments in survivor-centered advocacy. Within the Victim Rights' Group, there are additional teams and projects - **Legal Aid for Survivors of Sexual Assault (LASSA) Project**, composed of attorneys and paralegals trained in providing trauma-informed, client-centered legal services to survivors of sexual assault; the **Legal Alliance for Survivors of Abuse (LASA) Shelter Project**, a partnership between TRLA and rape crisis centers, shelters, and other organizations to connect survivors receiving community support to legal services; the **Survivor-Centered Economic Advocacy (SCEA) Team**, focused on helping survivors of crime and abuse navigate financial problems related to credit, changes in income, identity theft, debt, foreclosure, access to financial services, and financial confidence.



The Telephone Access to Justice Hotline can help to apply for free legal services.

(888) 988-9996

The lines are open Monday – Friday, 9AM – 5PM CST. State & federal eligibility guidelines apply.



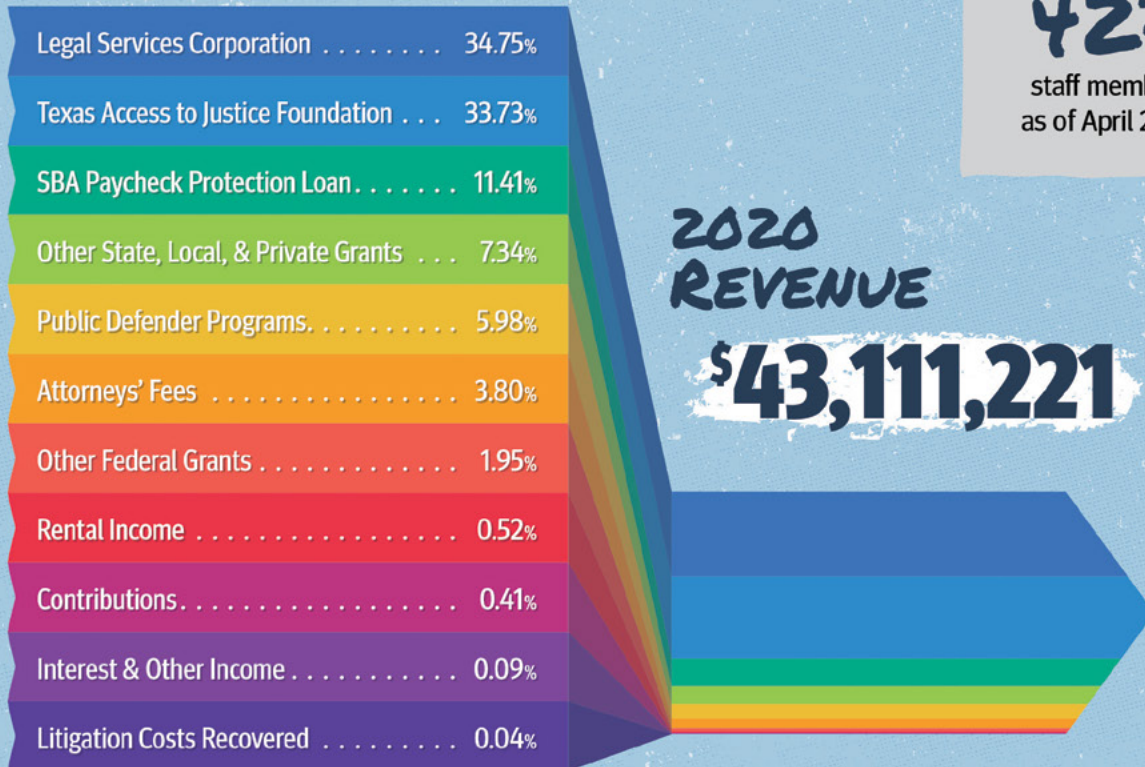
BY THE NUMBERS





427

staff members
as of April 2020





52,650

clients & their households served



\$3,381,989

received in lump-sum settlements



\$347,000

recovered for low-wage non-agricultural workers



\$187,128

obtained on behalf of survivors of violent crime



\$116,788

in recurring Monthly Benefits

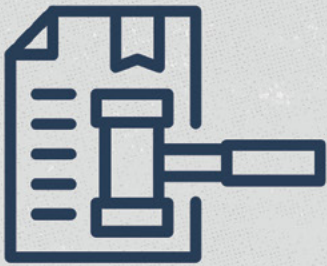


106

legal education virtual presentations provided

18,468

virtual presentation attendees



4,542

domestic violence cases

92

protective orders granted for victims of violent crimes



40

guardianships avoided with self-determination documents



1,982

veterans assisted



45

Psychiatric Advance Directives



20

Social Security cards secured



12

Powers of Attorney

7

Transfer on Death Deeds

1

Directive to Physician

completed using remote notarization

OUR FIGHT



A JOB AND A PLACE TO LIVE – BY THE SPRING OF 2020, BOTH WERE THREATENED.

The federal government's temporary moratorium on evictions, which was extended well into 2021, helped prevent homelessness and limit the spread of COVID-19. It could have done more. Not enough tenants were aware of the moratorium. Too many landlords tried to sidestep it. Even some judges ignored it.

In San Antonio, an apartment complex owned by a Florida company installed lock-out devices on the doors of dozens of tenants who qualified for the eviction moratorium. Juanita, a TRLA client at the complex who lost her job at the start of the pandemic, said the apartment manager took other steps to try to force her out, such as posting a notice on her door to vacate in three days with no warning or explanation.

Meanwhile, job losses in the pandemic pushed millions of Texans into an overwhelmed state workforce agency. Unemployment soared, and those who kept their jobs faced new challenges.

In some cases, the Texas Workforce Commission denied benefits outright. In other cases, the agency claimed it overpaid or mistakenly paid benefits and ordered clients to repay what they'd already received, putting them on the hook for money they needed as a lifeline. Although the commission said it only asked recipients to set up a payment plan, some clients received notice to pay in full – or lose future benefits.

Debt collectors began to circle. In Austin, Kim, a grandmother caring for three of her grandchildren, thought she had enough money to pay coming bills, especially since she had received a tax refund of \$4,900, but collection agencies withdrew money from her credit union account just before the Texas Supreme Court temporarily banned such seizures. The high court issued a ban to keep judgment creditors from collecting funds Texas families needed for basic goods and services.

With the safety nets that protect the state's most vulnerable workers fraying at the worst possible time, TRLA attorneys stepped in to ensure that clients wouldn't fall through.

At the San Antonio apartment complex, managers removed the lock-out devices after residents called the police, and a settlement brokered by TRLA allowed our client to stay in her home.

In appeals to the Workforce Commission over the denial of benefits for clients in the Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, San Antonio, and Austin, TRLA attorneys recovered nearly \$100,000 in back benefits and secured ongoing weekly benefits for our clients. We continue to fight the agency on behalf of clients who were told to pay benefits they'd already received.

For Kim, the grandmother in Austin, TRLA worked to dissolve the writ of garnishment and get the client's funds back into her account, allowing her to pay her bills and continue to support her grandchildren.

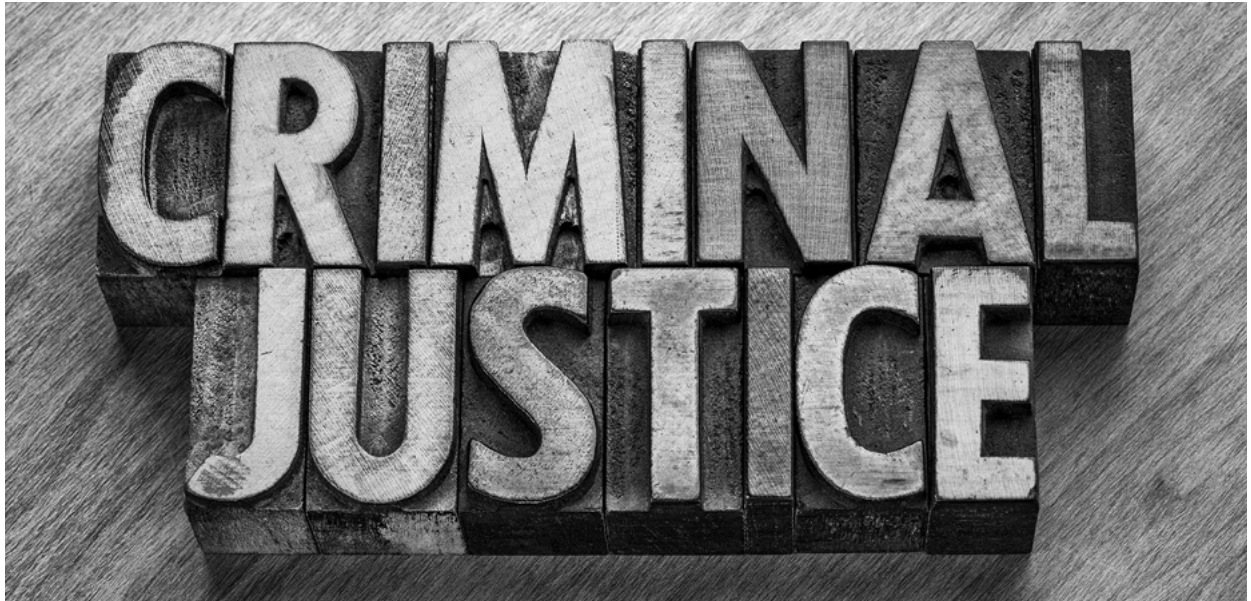
The pandemic threatened far more than tenuous employment and housing lifelines.

The COVID-19 death toll in Texas – highest in the nation – caused extreme stress for workers. After a home-health worker in the Rio Grande Valley lost both parents to COVID-19 in the same month, her employer forced her to take extended unpaid leave, even though she tested negative for the virus. Once she returned to work, her managers wrote her up for taking time for doctor visits and therapy appointments for depression.

TRLA sent a demand letter to her employer, making clear the company's violations of our client's right to a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The letter triggered a turnaround. A senior manager apologized to her in person, acknowledging the company had mistreated her. The company removed all infractions from the client's personnel file and provided an accommodation for medical appointments.

While 2021 has provided some initial signs of relief from the pandemic that disrupted so many lives and livelihoods, dire challenges face many of our clients. There is much work to be done and our resolve is strong. ♦



Our Public Defender Division

represents people facing jailable charges who can't afford an attorney. Handling cases that range from misdemeanors to felonies, juvenile proceedings and appeals, the program operates in 14 rural Texas counties.

The program launched with a handful of attorneys 14 years ago. In the years since, it has transformed the criminal justice system for indigent defendants in the largely rural and impoverished counties where it works.

Our Defenders make decisions independent of outside influences, avoiding the cronyism that often arises when judges pick favored attorneys to represent indigent defendants. Our experienced criminal defense attorneys are beholden only to the client and have full-time investigators and scientific experts at their disposal – just like wealthier clients with private attorneys.

As the spread of COVID-19 sharply increased in March, our clients were particularly vulnerable. Charged with a crime but not convicted, they languished in crowded county jails on bonds they couldn't pay. Most clients faced nonviolent charges.

Our Defenders quickly filed writs with county judges that won the release of most of our clients.

For clients who remained in jail, the pandemic effectively cut off contact with their attorneys. By April, however, our Defenders had placed a laptop in every jail in counties we serve.

“Since court dockets continued to move,” said Jessica Canter, chief public defender for Lavaca County, “we needed a safe way to communicate with clients to help us investigate and prepare their cases for trial.”

The result: Despite the pandemic, our Public Defenders assisted more than 1,000 clients in 2020, on par with previous years.

1,395 TRLA Public Defender cases closed in 2020

A CASE FOR PUBLIC DEFENSE:

In March 2020, police arrested an 18-year-old woman for striking her stepfather with a metal bowl in a heated family argument. Police arrested her and booked her into the Lavaca County Jail for first-degree felony aggravated assault.

For many indigent defendants, that would mean months in jail – maybe longer – and a grim journey through the criminal justice system. Six months later, this young woman pleaded to one year of deferred adjudication.

The young woman lived with her mother and her stepfather, a registered sex offender whom she accused of trying to touch her inappropriately. One night in March, a family argument developed, and

she hit her stepfather on the head with a small metal container used for snacks. Police arrested her after only listening to her stepfather.

Our public defenders first convinced the local prosecuting attorney to reduce the client’s charge to a Class A misdemeanor, which lowered the bond to \$2,500. That meant she could win her release from jail by paying a \$250 fee to a bail bondsman.

Still, she couldn’t pay the \$250 and remained in jail. Complicating matters, Gov. Greg Abbott had issued an executive order that prevented judges from waiving bond to a person charged with a crime involving “physical violence.” The order also suspended part of the Code of Criminal Procedure that permits the automatic release of a person after certain periods of time, depending on the charge. ♦



Learn more about the
Starr County Regional
Public Defender at:

<https://youtu.be/7xHADnfNz8E>



ABANDONED BY HIS MOTHER, A FOSTER YOUTH RECLAIMS HIS FUTURE

Time in foster care often results in multiple legal, financial, and trauma-related barriers that hinder a teenager's transition to successful adulthood. Without a driver's license, job possibilities are limited. A criminal warrant or record of even a minor offense makes it difficult to rent an apartment. Inconsistent or missing identification documents complicate citizenship and can shut off access to foster youth benefits.

It's common for young people to ask for help resolving numerous issues across different jurisdictions, including different countries. In 2020, TRLA's statewide Texas Foster Youth Project completed a three-year process to gain lawful permanent status for Brian, a 17-year-old native of the Bahamas.

The young man ended up in foster care after his father died. His mother left him with relatives, who soon refused to care for him. So, with his 18th birthday approaching, Project attorneys convinced Brian to remain in extended foster care until the immigration process was complete.

Project attorneys, staff from the nonprofit Court Appointed Special Advocates, and a Texas Department of Family and Protective Services attorney worked to obtain Special Immigrant Juvenile Status for Brian. They obtained his birth certificate from his aunt, avoiding an arduous process through the Bahamas to get it.

The Project worked with Child Protective Services to help Brian obtain his Texas ID and Social Security card, which allowed him to work legally. And now, with his Lawful Permanent Resident Card, Brian is pursuing his dream of joining in the U.S. Navy. ♦



LGBTQIA+ CIVIL RIGHTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

Being an LGBTQIA+ person can be difficult and isolating, particularly in a state whose institutions often refuse to recognize their identities. The experience can be even more difficult for queer and trans people of color, gender-diverse youth, and those in this community living in rural areas.

TRLA's LGBTQIA+ Civil Rights Project is helping trans and non-binary people change their names and correct their gender markers. Legally changing your name and gender marker to reflect your gender identity makes a difference in interacting with law enforcement, getting a job, and accessing essential services. Living your life, knowing that your ID matches your identity, can positively affect your mental and emotional health. Many of our clients have shared that having their legal documents

indicate how they identify can be an incredibly validating and affirming process.

In 2020, the LGBTQIA+ Civil Rights Project assisted 42 clients in successfully changing their names and gender markers. This project also did outreach and multiple intakes for a virtual Name and Gender Affirmation Clinic completed in early 2021 with the University of Texas School of Law Austin.

Beyond its clinics, the Project's work has prompted cases against discrimination in schools and the workplace. It also helps educate trans clients, prevented from changing their name or marker due to criminal records, on their options regarding sealing or expunging their records -- increasing access to employment and other opportunities. ♦



Southern Migrant Legal Services (SMLS),

a special project of TRLA, represents low-wage migrant agricultural workers who are exploited in their jobs. Working statewide in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee, SMLS advocates for workers in wage disputes, employment discrimination because of race or country of origin, and in cases of human trafficking or forced labor.

Countless migrant agricultural workers come to the U.S. on special visas intended to help employers hire foreign workers if there aren't enough U.S. citizens to do the job.

Many of these workers go into debt to pay for their travel to the U.S., money they never get back. They live in a foreign country, are asked to sign documents in an unfamiliar language, and report to bosses who control their every move.

There's no human resources department to which they can complain when getting shortchanged on pay or working excessive hours in unsanitary conditions. That can leave workers vulnerable to exploitation.

Fortunately, there is legal recourse for those willing to come forward. In three federal cases settled in 2020, SMLS attorneys and private counsel won nearly \$100,000 in unpaid wages, other damages, and fees for migrant workers.

SMLS attorneys settled a federal lawsuit with a farm labor contractor for unpaid wages owed to four Mexican citizens working on farms in Alabama and Florida. The contractor paid the workers less than the amount required by federal regulations, had them work excessive hours, and threatened to deport them and blacklist them from future work visas if they complained.

In a separate federal case against husband-and-wife Kentucky tobacco farmers, two Mexican citizens won unpaid wages and damages for emotional distress. The farmers consistently underpaid the workers, and they forced them to work in pesticide-laden areas, where one worker suffered severe chemical burns on his back.

According to the suit, the wife berated the workers as “worthless Mexicans” (and worse) and threatened to have them blocked from ever returning to the United States if they complained about the verbal abuse and working conditions.

In a third case, five South Africans settled a federal suit in Arkansas that alleged labor trafficking and wage violations by a family farm in a small town just west of Memphis. The workers had taken out loans to pay for their airfare to the U.S. after their employers – brothers who farmed rice, wheat, and soy in Arkansas – promised to promptly reimburse them.

When full reimbursement was slow in coming, the workers were told they had to prove their “loyalty” first, according to the suit. Interest on the workers' loans mounted while they worked under a torrent of verbal abuse and threats of deportation if they dared to complain about their pay, repayment of the loans, or any conditions on the farm.

The brothers fired two of the South Africans who had approached them to discuss working conditions, then forced the other three to leave.

Despite the importance of migrant agricultural workers to the economy – to put food on our tables – the fragility of their employment often leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.



"I AM MY OWN GUARDIAN NOW"

A person under the care of a court-appointed guardian is supposed to receive advocacy and assistance – the basic duties of a guardian.

The client, represented by TRLA attorneys, had been under guardianship for a decade and no longer needed supervision. In vain, she had tried to get the court to re-evaluate her guardianship. Finally, with the help of supporters, she found TRLA, which investigated her case and filed an application for restoration of rights, but the pandemic postponed an April hearing that could have restored her right to live more independently.

During local shelter-in-place orders, the client was forced into situations that put her health and safety at risk, including having to travel on a crowded bus to a day habilitation (dayhab) facility.

When the client's guardian refused to do anything

about the health risk, TRLA helped her file a complaint with Disability Rights Texas and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. The group home where the client lived owned the dayhab facility and shut it down after the complaint to the state.

The operators of the group home brought in other residents, defying shelter-in-place guidelines. Soon afterward, the client was exposed to COVID-19 and had to quarantine.

Ready to regain her rights to make choices about her own life, the client insisted on a hearing at the first opportunity. At the hearing, TRLA attorneys successfully argued that the client should have her rights restored so she could make her own health, housing, and other personal life decisions.

After the judge granted the client's request, the client said, "I am my own guardian now at 28 years old and I highly support anyone who is trying to get their guardianship dissolved. Keep your head up, don't give up, and keep fighting." ♦



A MOTHER, A DAUGHTER, AND A NEW LIFE

Sara came from Monterrey to Zapata, a Border city just south of Laredo, to live with her grandmother and start high school. Throughout high school, she had an on-again, off-again relationship with Fernando, a U.S. citizen two years older than her. She dropped out of high school just before her senior year and moved in with Fernando and his family. They married a few months later.

Soon the relationship turned violent. Sara's husband, given to jealous rants, abused her verbally, then physically. He punched her, leaving her bruised. Shortly after the birth of their first child, Sara's husband was arrested for assault for hitting her cousin. The reason: he wrongly suspected the two were having an affair.

TRLA represented Sara in obtaining a two-year protective order and a divorce on the grounds of cruelty.

TRLA then turned to the matter of Sara's immigration status. Under the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), victims of domestic violence can move forward in the immigration process without an abusive family member knowing about it.

TRLA represented Sara in filing an Application for Adjustment of Status under VAWA. Sara soon obtained her work permit and moved to San Antonio with her daughter to escape ongoing harassment from her ex-husband's family.

Sara then completed a GED program in San Antonio, then took additional courses to obtain a certification in early childhood education. She now supports herself and her daughter as a hotel housekeeping manager.

Sara's permanent resident status was granted in December 2020, allowing her to live and work in the United States without fear of being deported. And after being separated from her family for years, she and her daughter can now travel to Monterrey to visit them. ♦

WAYS TO GET INVOLVED



Share Your Time and Talent

There is a substantial divide between the millions who need legal services and those who can afford them. Our private attorneys, law students, and other volunteers in the Pro Bono and Private Attorney Involvement (PAI) Section are a critical piece in TRLA's fight to address this ever-growing justice gap. Despite developing challenges throughout 2020, our loyal volunteers stuck by our side – participating in our remote clinics, providing clients with advice, developing training opportunities, assisting clients with legal resources, and mentoring other volunteers.

In the early stages of the pandemic, TRLA shifted from in-person to virtual client services. We used videoconferencing technology to connect small business owners with pro bono attorneys and provide them with advice and guidance. We also conducted a set of clinics focused on the unfortunate surge in family law and domestic violence-related legal issues that COVID brought to so many clients' doorsteps.

Technology provided flexibility and removed geographic barriers, allowing global attorneys at Shearman Sterling an opportunity to assist more than 30 family law clients across TRLA's service area. Similarly, lawyers and law students worked together to virtually assist clients with preparing documents related to guardianship alternatives and estate planning. In the Rio Grande Valley, local attorneys and judiciary members joined TRLA staff for two virtual presentations to train new and potential pro bono attorneys on how to handle expunction and nondisclosure cases.

While there's no correct answer as to why individuals became lawyers, most people do say they decided to become a lawyer in part because they wanted to make a positive difference in people's lives. Pro bono representation is a great way to honor that intention. Everyone can give back to their communities in various ways. Still, perhaps the most impactful way is by leveraging your legal skills to impact those in need in a tangible way.

With the powerful tool of pro bono, you can literally change lives. You can represent domestic violence victims, children, survivors of human trafficking, and a full spectrum of people for whom you are a last resort. As a pro bono lawyer, you can give voice to the voiceless, make progress against all odds, and create hope where there was none.

***I AM RESPONSIBLE TO ASSURE
THAT ALL PERSONS HAVE ACCESS
TO COMPETENT REPRESENTATION
REGARDLESS OF WEALTH OR
POSITION IN LIFE.***

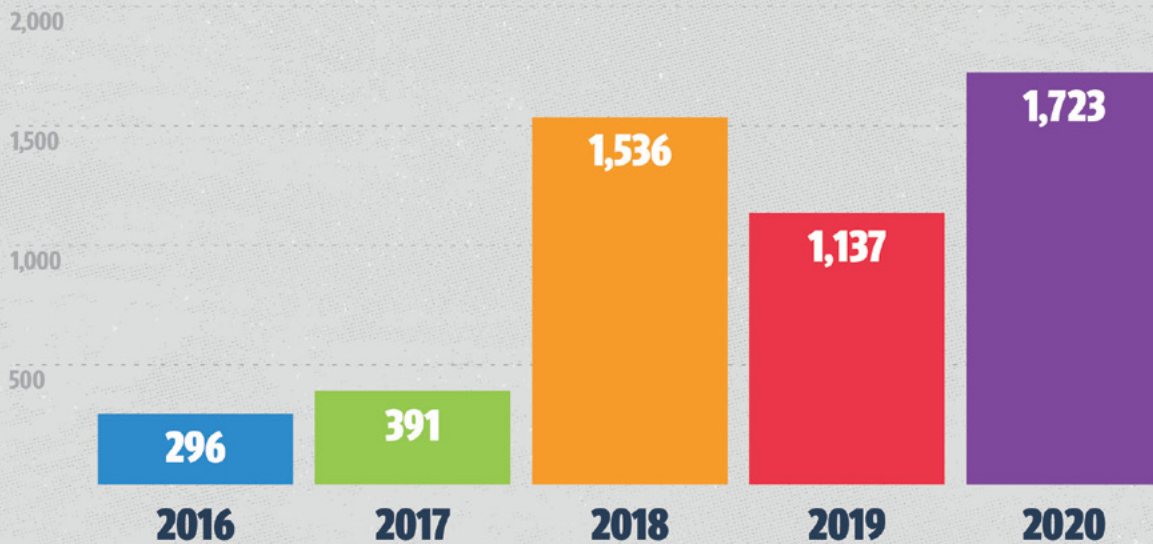
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