

## CHAIR'S REPORT



ELIZABETH E. MACK

### *Pro Bono Providers Need Us Now*

**O**NE OF MY FIRST LEGAL JOBS WAS AS A VOLUNTEER in a legal aid clinic during law school. I took a subway to the clinic, changing from the Red Line to the Orange Line in an infamous part of Boston then known as the Combat Zone. After the Orange Line reached my stop, I had to walk several blocks through a rough-looking neighborhood. Although not many miles away, the clinic was worlds apart from the ivory tower of law school. I was supervised by a tall, kind-hearted, talented paralegal – a sort of Julia Child of pro bono – who was one of just a handful of legal professionals at the clinic. The clinic was so understaffed that my two-afternoons-a-week commitment actually mattered. Although I knew precious little when I first walked in the door, I was eager, enthusiastic, and (I believe) a quick study. I also had a special license bestowed upon me by the state supreme court, which enabled me to appear in court on behalf of indigent clients.

My clients were indeed indigent. Some had been employed but had lost their jobs in the worsening economy of the latter half of the 1980s. Others had never held a meaningful job and were largely unemployable due to mental illness or other conditions. These people were downtrodden and lost within a system that required an advanced degree to navigate. Some had even been preyed upon by those who make a living taking advantage of the poor. Although what I saw saddened me deeply, I loved that job. I felt it was one small way I could try to make someone else's world better.

More than twenty years later pro bono work is still essential to who I am. As the years have gone by, I have learned that there are different ways to contribute. No doubt, volunteering in a clinic and taking on pro bono cases is a sure-fire way to be a pro bono lawyer. But if you do not have the time or the inclination for boots on the ground, you can write a check to your favorite pro bono provider. Cash means greater resources for understaffed and under-supported pro bono providers.

This year, more than ever, pro bono providers need us, whether to make donations of time, money, or both. Interest on Lawyer's Trust Accounts (IOLTA) is a significant source of funding for legal aid in Texas. Recent low and declining interest rates mean that IOLTA revenue in Texas is projected to drop to \$1.5 million in 2009 from \$20 million in 2007. In the best of times, IOLTA revenue met only 20% of the legal needs of indigent Texans (who make less than \$27,563 as a family of four or \$13,538 if an individual). The crisis is so acute that the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, which receives much of the IOLTA revenue for distribution to pro bono providers across Texas, has asked former grant recipients to begin planning for shortfalls of at least 75% beginning in 2010, and will not be considering any grant application from organizations that it has not funded in the past.

What is the Litigation Section doing to help? We have two programs through which we donate directly to pro bono providers. First, the Litigation Section sponsors a Summer Internship Program, which funds six (6) individual \$4,000 summer legal internships. Through an application process,

the Litigation Section awards internships to qualified pro bono providers and the providers select their own legal (law student) intern. In several instances, the intern is one of just three or four legal professionals in the office. But we also hope that, as happened with me, the interns will develop a lifelong devotion to pro bono service.

These internships have a positive impact on both the providers and on the interns themselves. Take Anna Summersett, a Litigation Section intern at the Human Rights Initiative (HRI) in Dallas. After her internship, she told us of her many legal accomplishments during her internship and her devotion to its cause. Additionally, she explained that during her internship, she worked with her school and HRI to establish a satellite office staffed by student volunteers on the law school campus. In that manner, one internship assisted an understaffed office, provided a student with a tremendous legal experience and a love of pro bono, and gave birth to the idea of a satellite provider office staffed by more student volunteers, who in turn will help more underprivileged Texans.

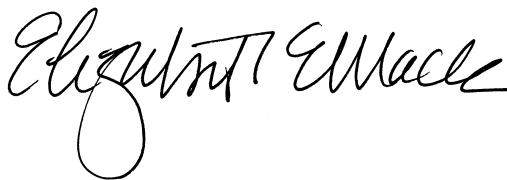
The Litigation Section also has a Grants Program under which we award a total of \$26,000 in grants to qualified pro bono service providers. Last year, nine providers shared in the grants for such programs as training sessions for a night court pro bono clinic (Cameron County Bar Association); production and distribution a judicial monograph for juvenile judges regarding issues surrounding youths with mental health and mental retardation issues (Texas Appleseed); and the Promotora Outreach Program, which trains trusted women members of the community and survivors of abuse to do outreach in homes, churches, community centers, and other venues to provide basic information about domestic violence and available legal and other services (Oficina Legal Del Pueblo Unido, Inc., known as the Texas Civil Rights Project).

More information about the Summer Internship Program, the Grants Program, and the recipients of the Internships and the Grants is available on our website, [www.litigationsection.com](http://www.litigationsection.com).

Many of you already contribute your time and/or money to your favorite pro bono provider. If you are not already doing so, please consider sparing a little time or spending a few dollars to assist those in need. Now, more than ever, Texas pro bono providers need your help to be able to serve low income Texans.

Now that I have asked for your assistance, please do not hesitate to let me know what the Litigation Section can do for you. I can be reached at [emack@lockelord.com](mailto:emack@lockelord.com).

All the best,



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