

Bridging the legal gap between needs and solutions.

Houston Volunteer Lawyers is the pro bono legal aid arm of the Houston Bar Association

www.makejusticehappen.org

Equal Access Program Overview

Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program is currently operating in the seventh year of the Equal Access to Justice Champions Program. The focus for the current bar year is on helping those less fortunate than ourselves and providing equal access to justice. The program was designed to increase the number of pro bono cases handled through the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program by at least 25 percent from 1,000 to 1,250 cases. During the initial bar year of the program, over 1,300 cases were placed. To continue to achieve this goal, and to make our effort self-sustaining, we are asking firms and corporations to pre-commit to handle a certain number of cases per year, depending on their size, for a five year period of time. Those who take on this commitment and help achieve the goal will be designated Equal Access to Justice Champions in all HBA publications.

It is estimated in a recent study by the Legal Services Corporation that 50 percent of the legal needs of indigent Americans who need and qualify for legal aid go unmet. In a letter dated May 1, 2006, the Supreme Court of Texas has challenged every Texas lawyer to contribute 50 hours of pro bono service this year. Lawyers in our Houston firms and corporations can meet this challenge by taking cases and becoming an Equal Access to Champion.

Handling cases for those less fortunate also serves to provide experience for our young lawyers and meaning for our more mature lawyers. Giving our younger lawyers their own cases with real clients and the possibility of a trial, perhaps in front of a jury, provides them with experience that they may not be able to find elsewhere. In addition to handling cases, our mature lawyers can also help to mentor and guide others through the process of representing real clients with real needs. The Texas Legislature is also allowing a deduction of up to \$500 per case of actual out-of-pocket expenses for an attorney providing pro bono legal services.

Handling pro bono cases is not just the responsibility of the trial lawyer. Our business lawyers can and should also handle these cases. The Courts will recognize and assist volunteers, and lawyers on the staff of HVLP are there to guide anyone through the process. Handling cases outside your normal field of expertise and serving a need can be its own kind of reward.

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