

Volunteer Guide

Houston Volunteer Lawyers

We Make It Easy.

You make justice
happen. We're here to
make it easy.

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What Is Houston Volunteer Lawyers?

Houston Volunteer Lawyers (“HVL”) is a non-profit service of the Houston Bar Association. We provide free civil legal aid to low-income individuals by connecting them with lawyers in the private bar who volunteer their time. Each year, HVL receives over 30,000 calls for help, and volunteer attorneys collectively donate \$4 million in legal services to eligible clients.

Established in 1981 and an independent 501(c)(3) corporation since 1987, HVL has a full-time staff of 30, nearly half of which are attorneys. In

In 2014, HVL received the Pro Bono Award from the State Bar of Texas for its outstanding contribution to access to the legal system by the poor.

2014, HVL received the Pro Bono Award from the State Bar of Texas for its outstanding contribution toward guaranteeing access to the legal system by the poor.

Our Mission

The mission of HVL is to provide free legal services to low-income people in Harris County and to promote volunteerism among lawyers.

Our Vision

The vision of HVL is to lead the Houston legal community’s efforts to provide access to civil justice for the area’s low-income population and to facilitate mentoring and support for volunteers through its own programs and collaboration with other Houston-area pro bono organizations that share HVL’s mission.

What Services Does Houston Volunteer Lawyers Provide?

HVL assists eligible clients with a broad array of civil matters, including family law, landlord/tenant, guardianship, probate, estate planning, IRS disputes, and bankruptcy.

Some of HVL's notable programs include:

- **Saturday Clinics.** HVL conducts twice-monthly Saturday Clinics at community centers throughout Harris County. These clinics provide free one-on-one legal advice on a walk-in basis and an opportunity to apply for extended pro bono services without the need to take time off work.
- **Veterans Legal Initiative.** Every Friday afternoon, HVL holds a legal advice clinic at the Michael DeBakey V.A. Hospital for United States Veterans and spouses of deceased Veterans. The Veterans clinic sees an average of 50 veterans each week.
- **Texas Children's Medical-Legal Partnership.** In November 2012, Texas Children's Hospital and HVL formed the first medical-legal partnership in the Houston area. A dedicated HVL staff attorney works on-site at the hospital and, working closely with the healthcare team and Texas Children's social work department, helps Texas Children's patients and their families with legal issues that affect the health of the child, such as special education, guardianships, and benefits appeals.
- **Disability Unit.** HVL works closely with healthcare providers in Houston and surrounding counties to help persons living with HIV and AIDS with legal problems that span estate planning to discrimination.

- **Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic.** HVL assists low-income individuals in disputes with the IRS, including audits, appeals, collections, and litigation. HVL works closely with Neighborhood Centers, South Texas College of Law, and the Taxpayer Advocate Service to provide these services.
- **Houston Area Women’s Center.** HVL assists victims of domestic violence at the Houston Area Women’s Center with protective orders and other eligible legal needs. HVL is at the HAWC shelter on a monthly basis, and the non-resident service center quarterly.
- **Star of Hope.** HVL holds a quarterly clinic at the Star of Hope men’s shelter, helping housing-impaired men with legal problems that may prevent them from rebuilding their lives.
- **Lunchtime Legal.** HVL holds this clinic for working families who may be unable to take time off work or find childcare to attend a Saturday clinic.
- **Asian-American Outreach.** HVL holds monthly legal advice clinics at VN Teamwork and the Chinese Community Center.
- **Virtual Clinics.** To accommodate busy volunteer attorneys, HVL hosts monthly virtual clinics at its office using volunteer lawyers who “meet” with applicants via Skype from their own desks across town.
- **Courthouse Booth.** Located on the 17th floor of the civil courthouse, HVL’s Courthouse Booth helps pro se litigants with family law cases. The Booth helps approximately 7,000 self-represented litigants each year.

Who Qualifies for Houston Volunteer Lawyers?

Applicants seeking pro bono representation through HVL (beyond one-time advice at a clinic) generally qualify if they:

- have a household income at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (“FPG”); and
- have assets that do not exceed a total equity value of \$7,500 for the applicant plus \$500 for each additional household member.¹

HVL offers extended eligibility for United States Veterans and spouses of deceased Veterans, persons with HIV/AIDS, and persons facing disputes with the IRS.

In addition to financial eligibility, HVL screens each potential pro bono case for legal merit, applicant criminal background, and conflicts, and refers applicants to other organizations if those organizations are better-suited to assist.

¹ HVL follows federal legal aid guidelines regarding the exempt status of certain applicant assets. The most common are the applicant’s homestead, vehicles, and tax-protected savings accounts such as a 401(k).

How Can Someone Get Help?

If someone you know needs help with a legal matter, they should attend one of HVL's legal advice clinics. Applicants can learn the locations, dates, and times of HVL's clinics by visiting the HVL website at www.makejusticehappen.org or calling HVL's Intake Line at **(713) 228-0732**.

At an HVL legal advice clinic, applicants are seen on a first-come-first-serve basis. After completing some initial paperwork, applicants are seated with a licensed Texas attorney where they receive approximately twenty minutes of free legal advice, regardless of income or legal issue. HVL informs applicants within 10 days whether HVL will accept their matter for ongoing representation.

www.MakeJusticeHappen.org
or
(713) 228-0732

Pro Bono Portal

You can find it at:

<https://portal.makejusticehappen.org>

Our home page at

www.makejusticehappen.org also features a “Take a Case” button that transfers you directly to the Portal.

How Do I Find a Pro Bono Case?

HVL has a wide variety of pro bono cases available for volunteers. You can find a case that is right for you in a number of ways:

1. **Online.** HVL is home to a one-of-a-kind online Pro Bono Portal that allows you to see a live list of waiting cases, searchable by law type, client profile, language spoken, case age, and much more. You can review case summaries for each waiting case, run conflicts checks, accept a case on the spot, download all of the relevant case documents in PDF, and get started.

2. **Email.** HVL sends weekly e-newsletters to its volunteers with links to available cases.

3. **Through Another Organization.** Law firms and corporate legal departments that participate in the Houston Bar Association’s Equal Access to Justice Champions Program may count pro bono matters handled through other legal service organizations towards up to one-third of the

firm's Equal Access target. To count, the work of such organizations must further HVL's mission to provide free legal services to low-income individuals in the Houston area. Approved organizations include, but are not limited to:*

- **AVDA (Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse)**
- **Beacon Law**
- Boatpeople SOS
- **Catholic Charities Cabrini Center**
- Disability Rights Texas
- Dispute Resolution Center
- Earl Carl Institute
- **Human Rights First**
- **KIND (Kids in Need of Defense)**
- Lone Star Legal Aid
- Memorial Assistance Ministries
- Neighborhood Centers
- **Tahirih Justice Center**
- Texas C-Bar
- Texas Civil Rights Project
- YMCA International

4. **Attend a Clinic.** One of the best ways to find a pro bono case is to volunteer at a legal advice clinic and choose to help someone you meet.

5. **Personal Request.** Contact our Pro Bono Department or any HVL Staff Attorney to find the best case for you.

*Organizations listed in bold now report quarterly to HVL the number of matters accepted by those firms that participate in the HBA's Equal Access to Justice Champions Program.

What is a “Clinic”? Can I Volunteer Without Taking a Case?

Yes! HVL hosts a variety of legal advice clinics throughout the year. We use clinics to perform intake. We recruit and depend on volunteer attorneys, firms, and corporations to help staff these clinics. Clinic volunteers are not obligated to take on a pro bono case, though experience tells us that many volunteers find pro bono cases that they are passionate about through our clinics!

The volunteer attorney’s task is to assess the applicant’s legal issue, provide initial legal advice, and gather and note relevant facts.

Intake clinics typically last two to three hours and are held at various community centers and social service agencies throughout the greater Houston area. Each clinic begins with a brief training, and an HVL staff attorney is always present to

help you. The volunteer attorney’s task is to assess the applicant’s legal issue, provide initial legal advice, and gather and note relevant facts. Individual interviews typically last between 20 to 30 minutes, with each volunteer seeing between three and five applicants at a clinic. HVL staff attorneys use the notes taken by volunteers at the clinic to make decisions about whether to accept a case for long-term representation.

Legal Advice Clinics are an excellent volunteer opportunity for lawyers in all areas and at every experience level. Clinic dates and locations are listed on the HVL website.

What Resources Does HVL Provide Volunteers?

HVL makes pro bono easy! We provide:

Mentors

HVL staff attorneys are charged with helping HVL's pro bono volunteers. Staff attorneys are present at every HVL clinic and also are assigned to every pro bono case. Volunteers with HVL pro bono matters receive the direct contact information of their staff attorney mentor in their initial case referral packet.

In addition, HVL and the HBA Family Law Section have established a formal family law mentor program that connects law firms and corporate legal departments with experienced private family lawyers.

Forms and Legal Resources

A host of forms and topical resources are available to volunteers via the Portal. Login and choose "My Open Cases" from the Main Menu. Select a matter that is open under your name, and links to all available resources will appear at the bottom of the screen. You may also contact any HVL staff attorney for help finding or using a form or legal resource material.

Training

HVL provides numerous training and CLE opportunities throughout the year. Opportunities are posted on the HVL website, distributed via the HVL e-newsletter, and posted on the Portal.

Find Your Mentor

The direct contact information for the staff attorney assigned to your case is accessible via the Portal.

Login to the Portal and choose “My Open Cases” from the home screen.

Select the case in question, and click “View” under the “Information” heading.

In addition, HVL is happy to provide tailored training seminars and workshops at your firm upon request. Simply contact our Pro Bono Department if you are interested.

Free Interpreters

HVL is proud to be an approved provider of the State Bar’s Language Access services. A volunteer with an active HVL case can access free telephonic (1-800-number) interpreter services for any language at any time (including American Sign Language). Also available by request are document translation and in-court interpreter services. Instructions are available on the Portal and are included in the initial case referral packet when applicable.

What is the Equal Access to Justice Champions Program?

The Equal Access to Justice Champions Program was started by the Houston Bar Association in 2006, to help ensure placement of Houston Volunteer Lawyers cases with pro bono volunteers. Originally, firms were tiered according to size, and firms within each tier committed to accept a certain number of pro bono cases from HVL each year for five years.

In October 2014, the Boards of the Houston Bar Association and Houston Volunteer Lawyers announced changes to the Champions Program to make available to volunteers a broader array of pro bono matters and to recognize the extensive pro bono work being done by Champion firms. Firms that participate in the Champions Program now pledge to accept, annually, one pro bono case for every five lawyers in their Houston office.

Champion firms also now may count pro bono matters handled through other legal service organizations towards up to one-third of the firm's Equal Access target. To count, the work of such organizations must further HVL's mission to provide free legal services to low-income individuals in the Houston area. Approved organizations include, but are not limited to:*

- **AVDA (Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse)**
 - **Beacon Law**
 - Boatpeople SOS
 - **Catholic Charities Cabrini Center**
 - Disability Rights Texas
 - Dispute Resolution Center
 - Earl Carl Institute
- (cont'd next page)

- **Human Rights First**
- **KIND (Kids in Need of Defense)**
- Lone Star Legal Aid
- Memorial Assistance Ministries
- Neighborhood Centers
- **Tahirih Justice Center**
- Texas C-Bar
- Texas Civil Rights Project
- YMCA International

The Champions Program year runs from July 1 to June 30.

*Organizations listed in bold now report quarterly to HVL the number of matters accepted by those firms that participate in the HBA's Equal Access to Justice Champions Program.

How Do I Access the HVL Pro Bono Portal?

The Pro Bono Portal is a wonderful tool that allows you to see a live list of HVL's waiting cases, sort and filter them by law type, client profile, language, and more, download case documents, and access resources such as mentor contact information, forms, and CLE material.

The Portal address is <https://portal.makejusticehappen.org>. You can find an instructional PowerPoint on the home page of the Portal with details about each of its features.

How to Register If You Have Volunteered with HVL Before

1. Go to <https://portal.makejusticehappen.org>
2. Under the "Registration" headline, select the first option: "If you have taken a case with us in the past or have already added yourself to our database, click HERE to create a username."
3. Enter your Texas bar number, first name, and last name.
4. You will be prompted to create a login and password, and then you can begin using the site!

How to Register If You Are New to HVL

1. Go to <https://portal.makejusticehappen.org>
2. Under the "Registration" headline, select the second option: "If you are new to helping us, click HERE to submit your information"

3. Enter your information. After our staff confirms your registration, you will receive an email prompting you to create a login and password.
4. Once you receive the email confirmation, go to the Portal website again.
5. Under the “Registration” headline, select the first option: “If you have taken a case with us in the past or have already added yourself to our database, click [HERE](#) to create a username.”
6. Enter your Texas bar number, first name, and last name.
7. You will be prompted to create a login and password, and then you can begin using the site!

Who Should I Contact If I Have a Question?

The HVL staff is eager to help you in any way possible. HVL has a full-time staff of 30, including our Executive Director, Pro Bono Coordinator, and 13 full-time Staff Attorneys.

Executive Director - Alissa Rubin Gomez

Alissa Rubin Gomez is the Executive Director of Houston Volunteer Lawyers, the pro bono arm of the Houston Bar Association. Prior to joining HVL in December 2011, Alissa was a commercial litigation partner in the Houston office of King & Spalding LLP - which she joined as an associate immediately after graduating from the University of Texas School of Law in 2002. Throughout her tenure at King & Spalding, Ms. Rubin Gomez regularly took pro bono cases from HVL and other organizations, and the Firm awarded her its pro bono service award in 2006, 2007, and 2008. Alissa's move to HVL was an extension of her dedication to providing legal services to persons in need. Ms. Rubin Gomez is in charge of HVL's overall operations, including programming, pro bono advancement, finances, and staff supervision.

Email: Alissa.Gomez@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0125

Pro Bono Coordinator - Marisa Flores

Marisa Flores came to HVL in 2009, after over a decade in management and human resources within the retail sector. As Pro Bono Coordinator for HVL, Ms. Flores oversees HVL's outreach to Houston area law firms, corporate legal departments, and other social service organizations, as well as the placement of individual cases with volunteer attorneys. In her six years with HVL, she has developed personal relationships with many attorneys, firms, and fellow coordinators and serves as HVL's point of contact on virtually everything "pro bono."

Email: Marisa.Flores@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0140

Pro Bono Assistant - Brittany Krohn

Brittany Krohn is HVL's Pro Bono Assistant. Ms. Krohn joined HVL in 2013 and is responsible for pro bono case handling and placement, event planning, and assisting HVL's pro bono volunteers in any way possible.

Email: Brittany.Krohn@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0138

Staff Attorney - Jessie Campbell

Jessie Campbell is the Director of HVL's Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC), assisting low-income taxpayers who have a controversy with the IRS. Ms. Campbell formerly served as a Managing Editor with Jones McClure Publishing, the publisher of O'Connors. Her publications included Federal Rules * Civil Trials, Federal Forms, and Texas Probate Code Plus. Ms. Campbell received her J.D. and M.A. in East European and Russian Studies from the University of Texas at Austin in 2003, and her B.A. in History from Tufts University.

Email: Jessie.Campbell@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0122

Staff Attorney, Courthouse Booth - Barbara "Bobbie" Cochran

Barbara "Bobbie" Cochran directs HVL's Courthouse Booth. A family lawyer with 25 years' experience, Ms. Cochran helps approximately 7,000 pro se litigants represent themselves in the Harris County Family Courts. She also serves as a senior mentor to HVL's staff attorneys and volunteers in complex family law matters. Ms. Cochran received her JD from the University of Houston Law Center in 1990, and her undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin. Ms. Cochran joined HVL in 2004.

Email: Barbara.Cochran@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0145

Staff Attorney - Mike Day

Mike Day joined HVL in July 2014 after six years in private practice where he focused on family and civil litigation. Prior to entering private practice, Mr. Day was an Assistant Attorney General where he represented medical providers and members of law enforcement in civil litigation throughout the State of Texas at both the trial and appellate levels. Before that, he was an Assistant District Attorney for Cooke County, where he prosecuted all levels of felonies and also was responsible for obtaining protective orders on behalf of victims of domestic violence. Mr. Day earned his law degree from South Texas College of Law and his bachelor's degree from the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a member of the Liberal Arts Honors Program.

Email: Mike.Day@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0148

Staff Attorney - Leesa Everitt

Leesa Everitt is an HVL staff attorney with experience in landlord/tenant, homeowners' association disputes, estate planning, probate, tax, consumer debt, student debt, and bankruptcy. Ms. Everitt received her undergraduate degree in Advertising with a minor in German from the University of Texas in 2000 and her law degree from the University of Houston Law Center in 2012.

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Direct Dial: (713) 275-0152

Staff Attorney, Medical-Legal Partnership - Michelle Friedberg

Michelle Friedberg, MPH, JD, has been the staff attorney for the Texas Children's Medical-Legal Partnership since it launched in November 2012. Prior to joining HVL, Ms. Friedberg worked as a Staff Attorney at Lone Star Legal Aid, providing free legal assistance to underserved, low-income families and individuals. She also worked for a small firm handling criminal defense and civil matters, including family, immigration, and probate issues. Prior to studying law, Ms. Friedberg earned her Master of Public Health from the University of Connecticut Health Center, where she focused on children's health and nutrition. Ms. Friedberg graduated from Emory University with a Bachelor's degree in psychology and from the University of Connecticut School of Law.

Email: Michelle.Friedberg@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (832) 826-7202

Staff Attorney/Director of Operations & Compliance - Michael Hofrichter

Michael Hofrichter joined HVL immediately after finishing law school at the University of Houston Law Center in 2010. Since then, he has worked on various programs at HVL including Veterans, the HBA Will-A-Thon, and the Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic. His legal interests focus on personal income tax, bankruptcy and estate planning/probate, but he also serves as the IT director and grant compliance officer for the organization. Mr. Hofrichter grew up in the northeast and attended Brandeis University for college, where he studied History, Anthropology, and Classical Studies.

Email: Michael.Hofrichter@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0147

Staff Attorney/Disability Unit Manager - Veronica Jacobs

Veronica Jacobs joined HVL as a staff attorney more than 20 years ago, in 1994. She represents persons living with HIV/AIDS in the areas of estate planning, landlord/tenant, public benefits, and family law. Ms. Jacobs has received numerous awards recognizing her outstanding contribution to legal services from the State Bar of Texas, the State Bar College, South Texas College of Law, the Houston Bar Association, and the NAACP. She earned her law degree from South Texas College of Law and her undergraduate degree in History from the University of Houston.

Email: Veronica.Jacobs@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0120

Staff Attorney/Disability Unit Assistant Manager - Jerry Larson

Jerry Larson is a staff attorney with HVL's Disability Unit. Before joining HVL in 2007, he served as Executive Director of a small non-profit law firm that helped low-income people with HIV/ AIDS. Mr. Larson received his BA in History from Sam Houston State University in 1995, his MA in Theological Studies from St. Thomas University in 2013, and his JD from Creighton University School of Law in 1999.

Email: Jerry.Larson@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0121

Staff Attorney, Veterans - Andrew Lehmann

Andrew Lehmann is a 2012 graduate of the University of Houston Law Center, and he oversees HVL's busy Veterans Department. His undergraduate degree is in Economics and Political Science from Florida State University. Prior to law school, Mr. Lehmann served five years in the Army as a M1 Armored Crewman, including two combat tours in Iraq. Mr. Lehmann specializes in Veterans Benefits and Military Law, and how benefits can affect other areas of the law like Social Security, Child Support, and taxes. Mr. Lehmann also has experience handling Family Law, Landlord/Tenant, and criminal matters.

Email: Andrew.Lehmann@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0137

Staff Attorney / Asian Clinic Director - Tyrone Lin

Tyrone Lin joined HVL as a Staff Attorney in 2005. He works to promote and provide legal services to the Asian-American community and also spearheads HVL's work with the Houston Area Women's Center. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin and his JD from South Texas College of Law. Mr. Lin began his legal career with a small law firm practicing personal injury law, and also clerked and worked for the Harris County Attorney's Office. He currently focuses on family law but also practices in other areas, including estate planning, probate, and guardianship.

Email: Tyrone.Lin@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0150

Staff Attorney - Blenda Ruiz

Blenda Ruiz assists persons living with HIV/AIDS with various types of civil matters, including family law, immigration, employment discrimination, landlord/tenant disputes, social security, consumer law, probate, estate planning, housing law, public benefits, and other disability rights matters. She joined HVL in September of 2009, when Southeast Texas Legal Clinic merged with HVL. She is a 1995 graduate of Texas Tech University School of Law.

Email: Blenda.Ruiz@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0149

Staff Attorney - Stephanie Sommerlatte

Stephanie Sommerlatte joined HVL as a staff attorney July 2010. Currently, she splits her time between the Disability Unit and HVL's general intake unit. As her clients' issues vary, her practice areas vary, but they revolve around family law, estate planning, Social Security Disability, and consumer issues. Ms. Sommerlatte is a December 2009 graduate of South Texas College of Law. She graduated with BA in Political Science from Texas Lutheran University in 2006.

Email: Stephanie.Sommerlatte@hvlp.org

Direct Dial: (713) 275-0141

Staff Attorney - Treva Stell

Treva Stell is a native Houstonian who received her undergraduate degree in English at University of Texas at Austin. Ms. Stell continued her studies at the University of Houston Law Center, where she focused on health law and public policy, and received her JD in 2009. She was active in student organizations and volunteered with "Street Law," a weekend program that taught middle school students about law and legal reasoning. She has been part of HVL's Disability Unit since 2011. Her practice focuses primarily on social security appeals, unemployment benefits, landlord/tenant and estate planning.

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