

State Bar of Texas **LEGAL SERVICES TO THE POOR IN CIVIL MATTERS COMMITTEE CELEBRATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY**

THE COMMITTEE IS STILL SERVING THE MISSION OF PROMOTING ACCESS TO JUSTICE.

WRITTEN BY SHELBY JEAN

THE EARLY- TO MID-1970S PROVED TO BE A TIME OF CHANGE for the provision of legal services to low-income people, both in Texas and throughout the United States. While several State Bar of Texas committees focused on local provision of services to those in need, the newly created Legal Services Corporation (LSC) was committed to bringing free legal services to low-income people across the nation.

In 2024, both LSC and the Legal Services to the Poor in Civil Matters Committee celebrate their 50th anniversaries. Both also share the common goal of promoting access to justice for all.

“It wasn’t about politics, and it really wasn’t about how we were going to change the world,” said Marvin Champlin, a Fort Worth attorney and the 1976-1977 chair of the bar’s Junior Bar Committee for Delivery of Legal Services to the Poor. “It really was about ‘Hey, this is what lawyers are supposed to do—period—’ and that was our marching order.”

In its early days, Champlin’s committee worked with other like-minded entities concerned with delivery of legal services such as the Task Force on National Legal Services Corporation, the Prepaid Legal Services Committee, and the Texas Advisory Council to the National Legal Services Corporation.

Since that time, the committee has

worked to serve and fulfill its original mission: to concern itself with the creation and means of implementation of programs, such as legal aid or pro bono efforts, to assure delivery of legal services to persons who are unable to afford counsel to help them with civil legal issues. Over these 50 years, its many chairs and committee members developed projects and objectives in furtherance of this goal. Among these projects are identifying areas of law that may benefit from a civil right to counsel; exploring self-represented litigant initiatives; promoting law student pro bono service programs and helping to expand existing programs; implementing a LiveHelp program to expand access to justice, especially in rural areas and for those affected by disasters; and recognizing the efforts of those who help increase access to justice through its State Bar Pro Bono Excellence Awards.

Today, committee members are dedicated to enhancing access to justice through the implementation of pro bono programs and services in collaboration with stakeholders and legal service providers. Its composition greatly assists in meeting its mission by including members of the judiciary, solo practitioners, and those who work at law firms, corporations, law schools, and legal aid organizations. Its members are committed to exploring ways to help ensure delivery of legal services to

Texans who are unable to afford counsel to represent them in civil matters. The committee also promotes events that support access to justice, including National Pro Bono Week, Veterans Week, and annual fundraisers such as LAWteria and the Champions of Justice Gala.

The committee has long served as a strong voice for access to justice for the poor, best summed up by Past Chair Champlin.

“We need to understand that lawyers have a gift, and it’s not just their own. It was given to them, and that gift needs to be used and it needs to be used well.” **TBJ**



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has been a licensed attorney since 2000, more than half of which has been spent working at Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas. First hired as a staff attorney, she joined the administrative team in 2010 as the director of communications. Jean recently resigned that position to once again practice law but without straying too far from the field of poverty law. She served on the State Bar of Texas Board of Directors from 2017 to 2020, is the current chair of the Legal Services to the Poor in Civil Matters Committee, and is a longtime member of the State Bar of Texas Poverty Law Section, having served in several officer positions and currently serving as a member of the section’s council.



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