

Liman Summer Fellowship Final Report

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I was a fellow with Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid (TRLA). I will be spending a year with the organization. I was a Liman Fellow during my first three months of my time with TRLA. TRLA is a nonprofit law firm that provides civil legal services at no cost to low-income clients. Offices are located throughout 68 Texas counties in cities such as Weslaco, Austin, Corpus Christi, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Edinburg, El Paso, Harlingen, Laredo, Sinton, and Victoria. More than 115 full-time attorneys and 55 paralegals help approximately 20,000 clients annually in 39 practice areas, including border issues, civil rights, consumer, economic and social justice, family law, housing, individual rights, labor and employment, and public benefits. TRLA handles many complex, high-impact cases, which may be familiar to the national public. One prominent example is when TRLA represented 48 mothers of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) in custody proceedings that followed a raid on the YFZ Ranch in Eldorado, Texas. TRLA works to ensure that all people, regardless of their income level, have equal access to legal rights and remedies.

TRLA prioritizes serving clients with pressing issues that are potentially life altering. Typically, candidates for services from legal aid will call a toll-free number, which links them to student law clerks in the Telephone Access to Justice (TAJ) Project. These clerks will screen the callers for income eligibility. If the applicant is eligible, the clerks will route the details of the caller's case to an attorney specializing in a particular practice area. My work is primarily centered around a specific population, rather than a specific area of law. As a TRLA fellow, my goal is improving the lives of homeless people living in San Antonio via the San Antonio Legal Assistance to the Homeless (LAH) Project.

I approach this goal through several different responsibilities. First, I have worked to identify and develop relationships with area homeless providers. Homeless clients are served by a variety of community organizations, such as emergency shelters, food pantries, transitional housing, substance abuse treatment facilities, homeless day centers, mobile canteens, and medical clinics. I have given presentations at local organizations in the San Antonio area for staff and clients in an effort to expand awareness of how TRLA can help homeless clients, especially for organizations that are on the frontline of daily interaction with the homeless community. Outreach often involves making contact with the director of the organization to schedule presentations and sending follow-up emails with additional information. In addition to presenting about TRLA's services, I also provide information about individuals' rights when applying for and/or receiving assistance. Currently, I am implementing an outreach schedule with area homeless service providers where I am available at set locations to conduct intake with potential clients on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. Under the guidance of my supervising attorney, I am later able to provide the client legal advice, counsel, and legal document preparation. Thus area organizations and homeless clients are able to interact face-to-face with a TRLA representative.

Secondly, I visit area organizations and directly meet with homeless individuals who believe they have legal problems. Homeless clients often have limited or non-existent access to resources, such as a telephone or transportation. By making TRLA services available onsite at locations where the homeless go to obtain basic services like shelter and food, I work to eliminate barriers that may deter homeless clients from obtaining legal services. Fortuitously, the effects of my outreach have also extended beyond the homeless community. Many of the organizations that serve homeless clients also come face-to-face

with other clients who find themselves in economic straits and in danger of becoming homeless. These organizations now refer clients to TRLA. I work not only with individuals who are currently homeless, but also with the growing number of those who are in danger of becoming homeless. I have been able to work with a variety of age groups, including runaways, shelter residents, couch surfers, and pregnant teen mothers.

Lastly, I serve as a TRLA representative in the Continuum of Care for the homeless in San Antonio and the surrounding counties. The position is useful for observing what San Antonio as a city has done in the past to combat homelessness and what it intends for the future. One aspect of this position I have particularly enjoyed is helping to plan Christmas Under the Bridge, an annual event that provides a meal, links to services, and holiday entertainment to approximately a thousand homeless people each year.

The mobility inherent to my tasks has contributed to one of the most interesting aspects of my work with TRLA. During my intake at different shelters, I interact with social workers and case managers in addition to clients. My conversations with a group of case workers at a particular shelter revealed a systematic problem with a newly implemented policy of the public housing authority. According to the new policy, case workers were able to certify homeless people in San Antonio for preference on a waiting list for city-subsidized housing. After my interaction with other homeless advocates, I discussed the problems with TRLA housing attorneys. However, the policy fell short of optimum efficacy in several ways. The policy being implemented by the housing authority was being used to deny the preference to individuals in a way that violated federal laws. TRLA attorneys and I set up a meeting with the heads of the San Antonio housing authority. During the meeting, we negotiated modifications in the policy and obtained the

housing authority's agreement regarding future implementation of the preference. I particularly enjoyed the experience because I was able to observe two different methods of dealing with a case. Instead of only having the tool of advocacy for one individual client, TRLA used a high level meeting with the housing authority to resolve the problem in a manner that benefited many.

My work with homeless service providers and the homeless community is intended to lay groundwork for when San Antonio opens Haven for Hope. Haven for Hope is a new shelter in San Antonio that is innovative in its approach to homelessness. Instead of simply providing food and shelter, Haven for Hope will provide an array of supportive services consolidated into one location. Homeless clients will have access to services like a "homeless court" for misdemeanors, physical and mental health services, a post office, and an education center for homeless children. TRLA is opening a new office at Haven for Hope. I will be staffing the office part-time in collaboration with the legal clinic program from a local law school. My hope is that by fostering relationships with the homeless population and homeless service providers now; organizations and the homeless will feel comfortable making referrals to us or visiting our offices once Haven for Hope opens.

My frequent contact with the homeless has profoundly influenced the way I view the population. Most importantly, I have come to appreciate how difficult it is for many of our clients to improve their financial situation. Many of our clients approach TRLA for aid with one issue, but during the course of interviews with clients, the interviewer quickly realizes that the issue a client intends to speak to you about is often just the tip of the iceberg. Public benefit issues are often tied up with family issues tied up with records/warrants issues tied up with a long list of other problems. In addition to the tangle

of legal issues in which our clients can find themselves, the extent of the issues can be exacerbated if a client lacks the funds, transportation, or other resources integral to maintaining a legal voice. Nevertheless, TRLA homeless clients frequently prevail against these barriers.

Since my graduation from Princeton in June 2009, I am in the process of applying to law school and hope to enter at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year. Prior to my time as a Liman fellow at TRLA, I interned with several non-profits specializing in legal services. I would like to expand upon my previous experience and my project with TRLA by continuing to work in the area of public interest law during my time in law school and after graduation.

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