

Promoting the dignity, self-sufficiency, safety, and stability of low-income Texans

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New Public Defender Model Debuts In Del Rio

Over 100 community leaders, dignitaries, and members of the legal community in Del Rio came together August 4th to celebrate the birth of what could transform the way Texas provides indigent defense – the grand opening celebration of the TRLA Regional Public Defender Office.

When U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black penned his 1963 decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright* declaring that state courts are required to provide lawyers for defendants in criminal cases unable to afford their own attorneys, the Court’s landmark ruling helped better define the true meaning of “justice for all.” Now approaching five years since institution of the Texas Fair Defense Act, those steering TRLA’s new public defender office are committed to providing a cost-effective, high quality form of indigent defense.

Paying tribute to the regional public defender office – the first of its kind to be entirely operated by a nonprofit – guests of honor included Texas House Rep. Pete Gallego, D-Alpine, State Task Force on Indigent Defense Director James D. Bethke, Val Verde County Commissioner Ramiro Ramon, and Chief Public Defender Joseph Cordova.

“This really is a significant achievement,” Gallego said. “When you’re accused of something, you want the opportunity to defend yourself. It’s a basic right.”

At the conclusion of the program, Gallego presented TRLA with a flag flown at the Austin Capitol in recognition of the office’s service to the community of Val Verde County. See photos and read about this momentous event on page 6. ★



Dignitaries and public defender office staff pose for a picture at the grand opening ceremony. Top row (L to R): Task Force on Indigent Defense Director James D. Bethke, Chief Public Defender Joseph Cordova, Assistant Public Defender Jose Garza, Investigator Raul Soto, Assistant Public Defender James McDermott, Texas House Rep. Pete Gallego, Val Verde County Commissioner Ramiro Ramon, TRLA Executive Director David Hall. Bottom row (L to R) Legal Assistant Janie Ramon, Secretary Beverly Estrada.

TRLA Law Clerks in Action

This summer 36 law students from 22 law schools spread across the country spent their three-month break working for TRLA on projects benefiting low-income Texans across the state. Read about their work on **pages 4-5**.

Thanks for Your Support!

Individuals

Allison Bastian
Barbara Ann Bailey Bogart
Patricia Collins
Dan Heath
Cynthia Fuller Leigh
Anne Morgan
Richard Yeomans
Debbie Ramirez
Paul Saenz
Roy Snodgrass

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Graves, Dougherty, Hearon, & Moody P.C.

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How Can I Help?

To make a tax-deductible contribution, please use the remittance envelope in the center of the newsletter, make a secure donation online at www.trla.org, or contact TRLA's Communications Director Ash Kosiewicz at 512-374-2764 or akosiewicz@trla.org.

Designate TRLA as your charity of choice through your workplace giving campaign or through Community Shares of Texas at www.communitysharestx.org.

Request a Remarkable Card at your local Randalls store and designate TRLA as your Good Neighbor of choice – our code is 255.1% of your purchases will support TRLA!

Donate office supplies, in-kind services, or technology.

TRLA Reunites Mother and 9-Month-Old Son

Yazmin Pecina arrived home to Brownsville from Mexico in June carrying a very precious cargo – her 9-month-old son, Jose Arturo Romero, Jr.



Bi-National Project on Family Violence Director Pamela Brown stands alongside Yazmin Pecina and her newly recovered 9-month-old son Jose outside the Brownsville airport on June 23 after returning from Mexico City.

The evening of January 14, 2006 had been the last time she had seen her son. On that day, the baby's father, Jose Arturo Romero, assaulted her and then drove off with the baby in her brother's car across the border into Mexico. When police told her they could only make a report of the incident, Pecina sought help from TRLA's Bi-National Project on Family Violence, which represents low-income survivors of family violence in cases that involve complex cross-border issues.

With the assistance of officials from the Mexican State of Hidalgo's Department of Integral Family Development (DIF), TRLA was able to confirm the baby's location in the city of Tulancingo, Hidalgo. Soon thereafter, Project Attorney Pamela Brown filed an application for the infant's return based on a relatively unknown international treaty known as the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Both Mexico and the United States are signatories to the treaty that is intended to facilitate the return of children who are wrongfully taken to another country by one of their parents.

"We initially didn't have any information regarding the infant's whereabouts," Brown said. "The DIF staff in Hidalgo were extremely helpful in both locating the child and assisting us in getting the court to promptly accept our application and act on it. This case actually had one of the speediest resolutions we've seen for a parental abduction of a child to Mexico."

Pecina knew that Romero would likely travel with the infant to his hometown in Hidalgo but she didn't have an address for him there. Complicating matters was the fact that Romero called her to say that he was with the infant in Agua Prieta, Sonora, more than 1450 miles north of Hidalgo.

"I don't think I would ever have seen my baby again if I had not gotten Legal Aid to help me ..." Pecina said. "When I told the customs people about how my baby's daddy took him, they were amazed and couldn't believe I got him back. They asked me how I was able to do it, and I told them that TRLA helped me." ★

Colonias Residents Celebrate New Path To Home Ownership

Owning a home for many Americans is a storied part of the fabled “American Dream.” This July 4th, Independence Day represented an important step towards securing that dream for many *colonias* residents living within the RioGrande Valley.

In an effort to raise awareness among *colonias* residents about a new law that allows residents purchasing property under a rent-to-own contract to convert the agreement into a more traditional style mortgage – giving the buyer immediate ownership rights – TRLA *Colonias* Project staff co-sponsored an Independence Day event June 29th at Colonias Unidas in RioGrande City, Texas. Generations, young and old, came together for food, drink, live music, and other festivities under the hot Texas sun, which included the symbolic hitting of a “contract for deed” piñata.

“This is a very positive change for low-income families, especially those living in *colonias* who usually finance the purchase of property through a rent-to-own type agreement known as a contract for deed,” said Veronica Rodriguez, TRLA *Colonias* Project attorney. “Now



Texas House Rep. Ryan Guillen poses ready to break the Contract for Deed piñata with residents of Las Lomas. Rep. Guillen was a keynote speaker at the Independence Day Celebration held at Colonias Unidas.



TRLA Colonias Project Manager Veronica Rodriguez answers questions regarding the recent change in the law that allows residents purchasing property under a rent-to-own contract to convert the agreement into a more traditional style mortgage.

under the new law, families can request a deed to the land they are buying at any time, thereby making them the legal owners of the property and giving them all the protections afforded to other landowners.”

Once legal ownership rights are secured, *colonias* families have the legal authority to work with local municipalities to allow for the installation of vital infrastructure like sewer lines and electricity. With this infrastructure, many health concerns plaguing *colonias* can be eliminated. In addition, these rights help low-income *colonias* residents leverage the equity of their property for emergencies and home repair.

“Contract for deed and rent-to-own arrangements are home-buying methods that leave the buyer extremely vulnerable to serious abuses, and deny homebuyers many of the same basic benefits and rights that other homeowners have,” said Texas State Rep. Ryan Guillen, a keynote speaker at the event.

The Independence Day event was sponsored by the TRLA *Colonias* Project and Colonias Unidas. ★

TRLA Law Clerks: A Dip into Public Interest Law

Every summer, law students from across the nation descend upon TRLA, all with unique motivations. For 10-12 weeks, these law clerks get their hands dirty, working closely with attorneys within TRLA's local offices on projects dedicated to serving the low-income community.

This summer, 36 law clerks from 22 law schools spread across 10 states worked on issues as timely as FEMA cases and border rights cases to the domestic violence cases that make up the majority of TRLA's caseload.

Highlighted here are three clerks from three different universities – read about their experiences, and why they chose TRLA. Read the full list of clerks below!

Nelida Lara	Michael S. Russell
Gretchen Au	Selina Llaguno
Kathrine Russell	Latoya Colley
Letha Allen	Sarah Allen
Eduardo Rodríguez	Bryan Dahlberg
Peter Hansen	Ali Hakeem
Harry Jay Boyer	Tracy Kasperek
Emilie Burnette	Laura Cristina Figueroa
Katherine Lengieza	Ruby Powers
Lina Chagoya	Amanda Moreno
Reece Dameron	Jennifer Hill
Amber VanSchuyver	Spring Miller
Jacob Mancha	Clermont Fraser
Gilberto Hernandez	Amanda Lynn Chase
Cynthia Dyar	Molly Rogers
Jacob Wedemeyer	Laurie Burns
Shelly Chattonpadhyay	Eugene Vaughan III

Jane Collins

A positive experience working with the University of Texas School of Law's Environmental Law Clinic sealed the deal for law clerk Jane Collins. During the clinic, Collins and her colleagues made a number of contacts with attorneys within TRLA's Austin office.

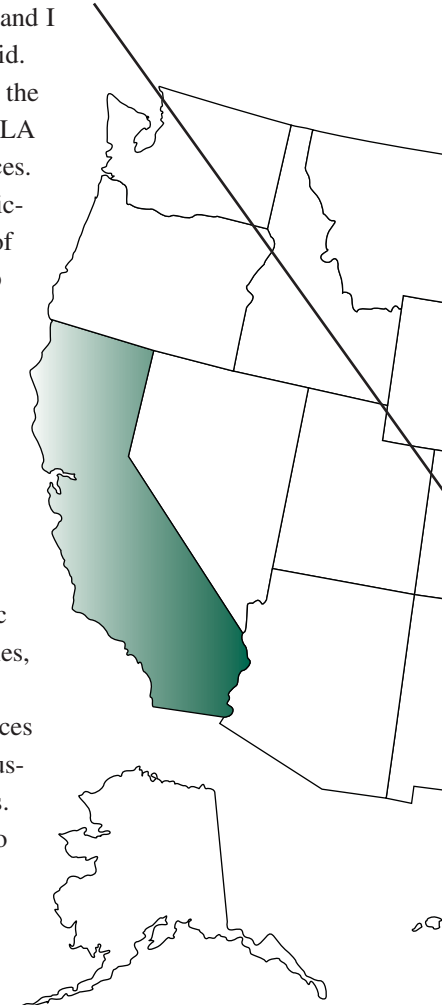
"I enjoyed the work we did in the clinic, and I wanted to do that for the summer," Collins said.

On the cusp of her third year of school at the UT School of Law, Collins' clerkship with TRLA exposed her to a number of new experiences. Working on a number of cases involving evictions of Katrina evacuees for nonpayment of rent, Collins had the opportunity to help secure FEMA benefits for clients and helped postpone or dismiss five eviction cases after making arrangements with landlords, FEMA and the City of Austin.

"The standards and requirements for what the evacuees have to demonstrate to receive [FEMA] assistance are convoluted," Collins said, adding that most evacuees have to unfairly struggle to navigate a bureaucratic process involving numerous phone calls, faxes, and protracted coordination.

Collins also had her first two experiences ever in front of a judge, appearing before a justice of the peace on two FEMA eviction cases.

"It's very satisfying to help people who have problems that are due only to the fact that they have limited resources," Collins said.

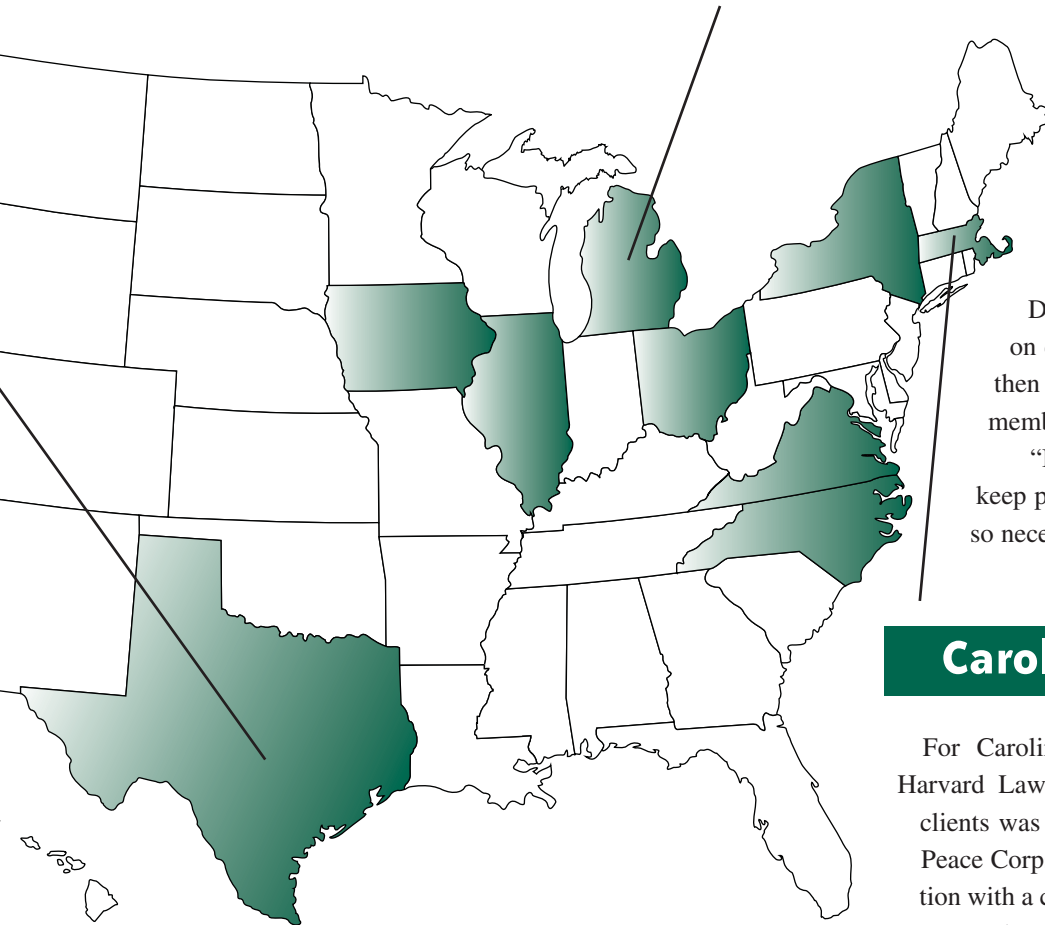


(clockwise) TRLA clerks Emilie Burnette, Katherine Lengieza, and Reece Dameron review their casework. All worked on diverse issues including housing and tax law.

Cindy Dyar

“I wanted to do something more,” said Cindy Dyar, a third-year law student at the University of Michigan School of Law. “I felt that getting a legal education was a way of effecting the most important change.”

For Cindy, public interest law is something she says she’s always known she’s wanted to do. Having served as an Americorps Vista volunteer years ago in San Antonio, Dyar’s experience working with microenterprise-lender ACCION Texas gave her a more tangible, concrete idea of the economic issues facing low-income clients. While at ACCION, Dyar made first contact with TRLA’s Legal Assistance to Microenterprises Project, working to create a referral project between the two agencies.



So when TRLA came a knocking during a recent career fair in Washington, D.C., Dyar jumped at the opportunity. During her 10 weeks at TRLA, Dyer worked in areas as diverse as economic justice to *colonias* to border rights.

“The *colonias* work is just amazing ...”

Dyar said. “I went door to door, doing outreach on contract-for-deed cases, talking to clients and then doing the legal work. I really liked talking to members of the community.

“If you don’t assist people now, you’re going to keep perpetuating poverty. I just think [legal aid] is so necessary, and it’s always going to be necessary.”

Caroline Rothert

For Caroline Rothert, a second-year law student at Harvard Law School, the chance to work directly with clients was an opportunity she couldn’t pass up. After a Peace Corps assignment to El Salvador, a paralegal position with a child advocacy organization in New York, and a summer internship with a policy-focused children rights

organization on the west coast, Rothert wanted a change.

“I had experience in everything but direct representation,” Rothert said. “I wanted to see a different part of the country too.”

Rothert’s established interest in child advocacy made her a perfect match for TRLA’s nascent Juvenile Justice team, led by TRLA Austin attorney Michele Clark. Rothert worked with Clark to compile case information, research, contact witnesses, and meet with her client and his family for a hearing in San Antonio.

“I really enjoyed having a client and being able to see the kid and his family, as opposed to just working on broader issues ...” Rothert said. “I get a lot of satisfaction for making things better for kids and their families, much more than I would at a different kind of organization or law firm.”

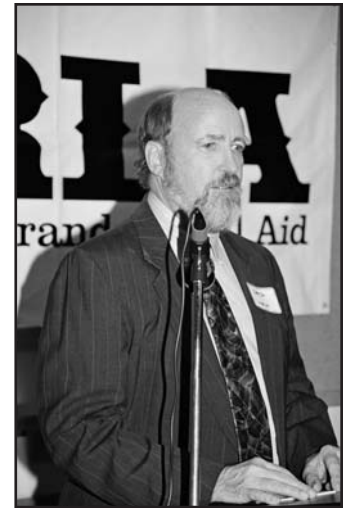


TRLA's Regional Public Defender Office Opens: A Cost-Effective, High Quality Form of Indigent Defense



Val Verde County Commissioner Ramiro Ramon shares his thoughts at the grand opening ceremony. Ramon called the innovative project "the role model for the state." "We're off and running, and we're already seeing a big difference," Ramon said. (Photo credit: Ruben Barragan)

TRLA Executive Director David Hall said the public defender office now gives poor people in Del Rio the holistic services they need to address their legal needs. "We're looking for ways to extend the power of civil legal services to the criminal process," Hall said. (Photo credit: Ruben Barragan)



Over 100 people representing diverse sectors of the Del Rio community were in attendance to commemorate the public defender office's grand opening. (Photo credit: Ruben Barragan)



Local musicians "Mariachi Azul" entertain invited guests with their musical color after the official ceremony concluded. (Photo credit: Ruben Barragan)



TRLA Chief Public Defender Joseph Cordova shakes hands with State Task Force on Indigent Defense Director James D. Bethke at the conclusion of the grand opening ceremony.

About Our Organization

What is TRLA?

Founded in 1970, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) is a nonprofit agency that specializes in providing free civil legal services to indigent residents of central, south, and west Texas. To address the huge variety of problems confronting our clients, TRLA's 105 lawyers, 55 paralegals, and 4 social workers offer a broad range of 39 practice areas including family law, housing, consumer protection, public benefits, employment, individual rights, and others.

Who does TRLA help?

Every year, TRLA serves approximately 20,000 residents of southwest Texas, including farmworkers, victims of domestic abuse, homeless persons, persons with disabilities, and many others. Nearly three-quarters of our clients are of Hispanic descent. TRLA clients seek assistance with problems that clearly deserve attention: obtaining protective orders, child custody, or child support; fighting unfair evictions; probating wills; accessing public benefits; and many other life-threatening or altering issues.

Why is TRLA's work important?

Legal aid is a critical part of our nation's promise to provide "justice for all." Legal aid strives to make the justice system accessible to all members of society because without equal access, justice would become just another consumer commodity available only to those who could afford it.

Where is TRLA?

TRLA is the largest legal aid provider in Texas and the third largest of its kind in the nation. TRLA's 68-county service area is larger than most states! Program headquarters are in Weslaco, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, with 15 branch offices located throughout the state in Austin, Corpus Christi, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Edinburg, El Paso, Harlingen, Laredo, San Antonio, Sinton, and Victoria. TRLA also operates the Southern Migrant Legal Services Project out of an office in Nashville, Tennessee.

Who supports TRLA?

TRLA is able to provide free services to clients due to the generous support of the Legal Services Corporation, the Texas Equal Access to Justice Foundation, and numerous federal and state agencies, private foundations, corporations, and individuals. To make a tax-deductible contribution, please use the remittance envelope in the center of the newsletter, make a secure donation online at www.trla.org, or contact TRLA's Communications Director Ash Kosiewicz at 512-374-2764 or akosiewicz@trla.org.

How can I contact TRLA?

To learn more about our work please visit our website at www.trla.org. If you are seeking legal assistance, please contact one of our local branch offices or call our toll-free number at **1-888-988-9996**.

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For local contact information
visit our Web site:

www.trla.org

To apply for legal services or
make referrals, call toll-free:
1-888-988-9996.



Legal Aid in Austin is celebrating its 40th anniversary at a special open house Oct. 5 at Legal Aid's new home in Austin, 4920 N IH 35. The open house starts at 5:30 p.m. Special guests include Luci Baines Johnson, Senator Gonzalo Barrientos, and Catherine Robb. Pictured above is the 1966 Legal Aid staff.

TRLA

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

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