

Champions of Justice Gala Raises \$413,000 for Legal Services for Low-Income Texas Veterans

The Texas Access to Justice Commission honored the service of veterans throughout the state at the Champions of Justice Gala Benefiting Veterans on Tuesday, May 1, at the AT&T Executive Education & Conference Center in Austin, Texas. More than \$413,000 was raised to help provide civil legal services to low-income Texas veterans.

"The Champions of Justice Gala Benefiting Veterans honored the service of the brave men and women who have sacrificed for our country," Texas Supreme Court Justice Nathan L. Hecht, the Court's liaison for access to justice issues, said. "These individuals dedicate their lives to our country, yet many do not receive assistance with civil legal matters, including improper denial of health benefits. With the funds raised at the gala, we are able to continue the fight to improve access to justice for all Texans."

Admiral William H. McRaven – Keynote Speaker

Admiral William H. McRaven, ninth commander of U.S. Special Operations Command who was in command of the mission to apprehend Osama Bin Laden, spoke at the gala about the importance of helping veterans with civil legal issues.

Adm. McRaven graduated from The University of Texas at Austin in 1977. The admiral has commanded at every level within the special operations community, including assignments as deputy commanding general for Operations at Joint Special Operations Command, commodore of Naval Special Warfare Group ONE, commander of SEAL Team THREE, task group commander in the CENTCOM area of responsibility, task unit commander during Desert Storm and Desert Shield, squadron commander at Naval Special Warfare Development Group, and SEAL platoon commander at Underwater Demolition Team TWENTY-ONE/SEAL Team FOUR.



Champions of Justice Gala Benefiting Veterans

Host committee co-chairs for the gala include prominent Texas attorneys who are donating their time for the effort: S. Jack Balagia of Exxon Mobil Corporation in Houston, Joseph D. Jamail

Jr. of Jamail & Kolius in Houston, Charles W. Matthews Jr. of Irving (formerly of Exxon Mobil Corporation), Harriet E. Miers of Locke Lord LLP in Dallas, Wayne A. Reaud of Reaud Law Firm in Beaumont and Scott E. Rozzell of CenterPoint Energy Inc. in Houston.

Major sponsors of the event included: AT&T, The Reaud Foundation, Inc., Baker Botts LLP, Exxon Mobil and Charles W. Matthews, Locke Lord Bissell & Liddell LLP, Jamail & Kolius, Fulbright & Jaworski LLP and Vinson & Elkins LLP. The State Bar of Texas donated funds to cover the expenses of the gala.

More than \$1 million has been raised by this gala in the past three years, benefiting veterans. Proceeds from the gala will be distributed by the Texas Access to Justice Foundation and dedicated to the provision of civil legal services for low-income Texas veterans. These services assist in addressing legal issues related to marital problems, difficulties in getting medical or disability benefits, wrongful foreclosures, and other situations that may arise due to a veteran's absence during military service.

Access to Justice Awards

Several awards were presented at the Champions of Justice Gala to distinguished legal aid advocates for their contributions in improving access to justice.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst received the Legislative Hero Award for his outstanding leadership in the Senate and his work to ensure that access to the courts is available to all Texans. As president of the Texas Senate, Lt. Gov. Dewhurst ensured that for the past two legislative sessions there was funding, of almost \$38 million, for legal aid during a time of crisis. The Legislative Hero Award program was launched in 2010 to recognize legislators who, through their efforts, have significantly advanced access to justice in Texas by assisting with the appropriation of funds and/or other substantive activities related to the provision of legal aid in the state.

Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott received the Star of Justice Award that recognizes dedication to improving access to justice for low-income Texans. Abbott was recognized for his exemplary support of access to justice in Texas and partnership in serving the legal needs of Texans. Abbott has worked hard to safeguard the solvency of the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund, which among other things, provides funding for civil legal services to victims of crime. Also, the attorney general was instrumental in ensuring that \$10 million from the national mortgage settlement was directed to civil legal aid.

Recipients of the James B. Sales Boots on the Ground Award included **Terry Tottenham**, of counsel to Fulbright & Jaworski LLP and former president of the State Bar of Texas; **Charles Kimbrough**, partner of Bickerstaff Heath Delgado Acosta LLP, and **Bruce Bower**, deputy director of Texas Legal Services Center. Tottenham was recognized for his role in initiating Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans, a statewide coalition of Texas lawyers who provide pro bono legal services to veterans in need—which has been replicated in 13 states. As the lead attorney representing seven of the 13 families in the “Jarrell 13” case, Kimbrough’s pro bono efforts were monumental in helping the families receive justice when they were sold property but never given title to their land. Bower was honored for his efforts in creating the Legal Hotline for Older Texans, a first-of-its-kind hotline where individualized legal advice is provided to clients over the phone, which is now being implemented in hundreds of legal aid offices throughout the country.

Texas Legal Aid

In 2001, the Supreme Court of Texas created the Texas Access to Justice Commission to develop and implement initiatives designed to expand access to and enhance the quality of justice in civil legal matters for low-income Texas families. Since its inception, the Commission established legal training academies, a student loan repayment assistance program, resource development measures and innovative technology initiatives.

“Legal aid helps veterans obtain the medical benefits they require for mental and physical injuries they have sustained during military service. More die from suicide on their return than have died in combat,” Harry M. Reasoner, chair of the Texas Access to Justice Commission said. “Regardless of economic status, access to justice should be available to all Texans. It is particularly painful to see our veterans who have sacrificed so much denied justice on their return.”

More than 6.1 million Texans currently qualify for civil legal aid. Yet, for every Texan that is helped by legal aid, a qualifying individual is turned away due to a lack of resources. To be eligible for civil legal aid, an individual must earn no more than \$13,963 a year. For a family of four, the household income cannot exceed \$28,813.