

# LegalFront

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## Partnerships for Serving the Poor

With more than 1,000,000 eligible clients and only seventy attorneys on staff, the provision of civil legal services to the people in the Houston area is a difficult task for Lone Star Legal Aid (Lone Star) to accomplish. When disasters strike the Lone Star service area, as happened with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the difficulty in serving existing clients, in addition to the new clients that have relocated to the service area, is exacerbated. However, private attorneys in the Houston area have always stepped up in times of crisis.

While the efforts of these attorneys are essential in times of crisis, clients also continue to require assistance with day-to-day legal needs. To help address those needs, Lone Star is striving to establish on-going partnerships with firms in the Houston area. One of Lone Star's most successful partnerships to date has been with the Houston firm of Beck Redden & Secrest. This firm has agreed to assist eligible Houston clients facing eviction actions and other landlord-tenant disputes. It has proven to be a win-win proposition for the clients and the firm.

Beck Redden attorney Fields Alexander, who chairs that firm's pro bono efforts, has stated that Beck Redden is delighted to assist Lone Star in defending these landlord-tenant disputes. "This is a perfect pro bono opportunity for us. First and foremost, we are helping to fulfill a vital community need by assisting people who really need a lawyer and cannot afford one. The prospect of a family being evicted, being thrown out on the street, is a dire one for Lone Star's clients. We owe it to them and to the community to do what we can to help. Second, these cases present wonderful training tools for our young lawyers, who are chomping at the bit to get into court and in front of a jury. They are fast-paced and are, at their core, contract disputes, and yet they also have real and immediate impact on people's lives. They are fun to try, and can require a good deal of creative advocacy. I've tried several of them myself. The bottom line is

that we are honored to team up with Lone Star to assist their clients in these sorts of landlord-tenant disputes."

Lone Star has also formed a partnership with Vinson & Elkins to assist clients desperate to restructure their debts and finances. Duston McFaul, a bankruptcy attorney with the firm, and his paralegal, Cindy Whitman, have lead this effort and assisted several Lone Star clients with severe financial problems. In addition to handling bankruptcy actions where appropriate, they have counseled clients on legal issues enabling them to avoid court proceedings. Mr. McFaul's expertise has lessened the burden on Lone Star staff to assist these clients. He relays, "It's nice for us to be able to lend a hand to those in real need, and the firm's dedication to pro bono matters runs very deep. Lone Star does rigorous screening work, so even if you're with a large firm with a corporate focus, potential conflicts are not as daunting as they may seem. Many of those needing help have debts that have already been purchased by collectors and others may have just one mammoth liability resulting from a serious medical ailment. Our practice is focused on corporate chapter 11 bankruptcy work, but Cindy began her background as a paralegal working with a trustee on consumer cases. So it's an understatement to say that she has been a tremendous asset in our assistance to Lone Star and its clients."

Lone Star is constantly looking to develop similar programs with other firms in Houston. Once Lone Star has been successful in getting more firms on board in Houston, its long-term goal is to export these relationships to assist clients in the smaller cities of East Texas who do not have access to these resources. It is these partnerships that will serve to make a true difference in providing equal access to the justice system for the indigent members of the Lone Star service area.