

CLASS OF 2011 FELLOW UPDATE – MICHELLE SMITH
SPONSORED BY TEXAS ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOUNDATION
TEXAS CIVIL RIGHTS PROJECT – Austin, TX

PROJECT: End the indifference, isolation, and silence that cause the accidental death penalty for those confined in Texas jails, prisons, and detention centers through education, outreach, and advocacy.



HIGHLIGHTS TO DATE:

- In her first year alone, Michelle responded to 344 letters from inmates asking for advice or referrals, and met with 29 individuals at presentations to the Texas Inmate Family Association to discuss their family member's situation in prison.
- Michelle reviewed medical records and investigated cases for 40 prisoners, gave nine people limited representation, and provided full representation to another 18 prisoners.
- Fourteen of Michelle's cases had policy implications for all 160,000 Texas inmates on issues like suicide, disability accessibility, excessive heat and force, and sexual assault.
- Michelle's project has garnered significant media attention, from local television spots in Austin to articles in the *Austin American Statesman* and the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*.

WHAT'S NEXT:

- Michelle plans to work with advocates to design the best health and safety reforms, policies, and trainings. She will reach out to prison advocates to obtain settlement agreements and policies for restricting the shackling of pregnant inmates, expanding suicide screening in jails, providing sign language interpreters in prison disciplinary hearings, and making prisons accessible to those in wheelchairs.
- She will continue to seek the implementation and enforcement of laws and standards using targeted litigation.
- Michelle also plans to write and publicize reports about the most serious issues and solutions.

GREAT CLIENT STORY: *I had a client whose son did not receive mental health treatment after he was arrested, to fatal consequences. Even though the jail staff noted that he was suicidal upon intake, jailers did nothing to monitor him, and he hung himself. After an all-day mediation, we were able to provide the family with \$100,000 in monetary damages. The jail also changed their policies to ensure they could properly monitor suicidal inmates. They agreed to hang a plaque in memory of the son and have annual trainings for jail staff on mental health issues. Finally, and probably most importantly, the County opened a new jail with no bars in the cells from which an inmate could hang a ligature, provided for padded cells, and installed better cameras for monitoring. Not only did I help get closure on this tragic event for the family, I worked on a settlement to make sure no other families lose a loved one in this manner again.*