

EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS®

Helping Lawyers Help Community



Sarah Loeffler

**Montgomery County
Women's Center
Conroe, TX**

Sponsored by

**Texas Access to
Justice Foundation**

and

**The John M. O'Quinn
Foundation**

Equal Justice Works is the national leader in creating public interest opportunities for law students and lawyers. Collaborating with the nation's leading law schools, law firms, corporate legal departments, and nonprofit organizations, Equal Justice Works offers a continuum of opportunities that provide the training and skills that enable attorneys to provide effective representation to underserved communities and causes. Equal Justice Works is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization. For additional information about Equal Justice Works, please visit: <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org>.

FELLOWSHIP SUMMARY

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Sarah provided permanent legal solutions to domestic violence victims in Montgomery County, Texas, through direct representation, public education, and development of a robust pro bono program.

NEED ADDRESSED BY PROJECT

The absence of permanent legal solutions traps many domestic violence victims in horrific situations. Domestic violence has increased by more than 50 percent in Montgomery County since 2007. The need for family legal services among domestic violence victims has increased with the county's rising low-income population. The Montgomery County Women's Center (MCWC) and Lone Star Legal Aid help secure protective orders for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Limited resources, however, prevent the agencies from prioritizing divorce and custody suits for these victims. Texas has a high standard for obtaining protective orders against abusers, which historically has resulted in the courts requiring a pattern of severe abuse over a span of many years for protective order approval. Achieving permanent legal solutions before abuse becomes perpetual protects victims and helps them escape their abuser.

FELLOWSHIP HIGHLIGHTS

In the past two years, Sarah has:

- Built MCWC's first sustainable pro bono program to assist pro se litigants and provide direct representation in divorce and custody matters
- Recruited and trained 21 lawyers, 24 law students, and one paralegal to provide pro bono services
- Produced practice handbooks for volunteer advocates
- Trained counseling staff to identify their clients' domestic abuse legal issues
- Provided brief advice, pro se help, or referrals to 140 clients
- Represented 50 clients in divorce, custody, adoption, or other family law matters
- Garnered a \$90,000 grant to fund her attorney position at MCWC given her project's success in narrowing the gap between the long-term needs of domestic violence victims and access to legal services

POST-FELLOWSHIP PLANS

Now that the Fellowship is complete, Sarah plans to:

- Train the new attorney hired to sustain her project
- Continue to advocate for domestic violence and sexual assault victims
- Promote Equal Justice Works to budding public interest attorneys
- Cultivate the relationships she has made with other Equal Justice Works Fellows to help sustain a nationwide network of advocates