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## **Pro Bono Opportunities**

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## Pro Bono Advocacy Opportunities for Texas Volunteer Lawyers

### About Disability Rights Texas

Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to protect and advance the legal, human, and civil rights of people with disabilities living in Texas. DRTx was established in 1977 by the United States Congress as Texas' federally designated legal protection and advocacy agency (P&A). We protect and advocate for the legal and human rights of people with disabilities, a majority of whom are poor.

### The Need for Pro Bono Advocacy

Although DRTx has no income requirements to receive assistance, most of our clients live at or below the poverty line. As of 2014, there is 1 Texas attorney for every 443 Texans that live above the poverty line. By contrast, there is only 1 legal aid Texas attorney for every 11,000 Texans that live below the poverty line. Texas ranks #50 out of 50 states in rendering effective and meaningful legal services to the poor.

Disability Rights Texas has 9 offices located in Houston, Dallas, Wichita Falls, Lubbock, El Paso, Austin, San Antonio, Nacogdoches, and McAllen that serve all 254 Texas counties. Legal services are provided by DRTx's 33 attorneys and 42 non-attorney advocates, and by pro bono attorney volunteers, and legal clerks and interns.

In 2014, DRTx received 6,868 requests for services, handled over 4,134 active cases, and concluded 2,817 cases. Because of our limited resources, many requests for service receive only short term assistance and referral, even though the clients really want, and are often in desperate need of a higher level of legal representation.

Pro Bono attorneys are vital to the success of Disability Rights Texas. Without our pro bono lawyers and law firm partners, the number of clients that we serve would be unacceptably limited. We rely on pro bono attorney volunteer hours to assist and support each legal issue team throughout Texas to advise, assist, and zealously represent our clients and protect their rights.

### The Issue Teams

DRTx is organized by legal issue teams across the State of Texas. These teams are:

- Special Education
- "HEAT" – Housing, Employment, Accessibility, and Transportation
- CI/Healthcare – Community Integration and Healthcare
- "IRCL" – Institutional Rights and Civil Liberties

These individual issue teams operate all across the State, and deliver specialized legal services, protection, and advocacy within that team's specific area of expertise. This ensures that all DRTx clients receive legal services from the very best attorneys and advocates with the resources, training, knowledge, and experience to handle their individual case and meet their unique and often specialized needs. Each issue team has its own set of opportunities for pro bono volunteer advocacy.

### **The Special Education Team**

The Special Education team assists Texas students with disabilities in maximizing their opportunities to learn and grow in school by ensuring that they receive all of the education services and supports that they need in the least-restrictive settings with their non-disabled peers. For this to be a reality for the more than 400,000 students in Texas eligible for special education services, school districts are legally required to fully implement the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Parents of students with disabilities must know and exercise their rights, and the rights of their children. The attorneys and advocates assigned to the Special Education Team make this a reality by:

- Helping to establish and maintain integrated classrooms where students with disabilities learn alongside students without disabilities
- Assisting students with disabilities in receiving the assistive technology and training required for their success in school
- Ensuring that students are not disciplined, restrained or secluded because of a disability
- Assisting students in receiving the transition services needed to prepare for life after school
- Raising awareness among parents, advocates and policy makers so they have all the legal information they need to ensure the successful education of students with disabilities

### **The "HEAT" Team**

The HEAT team exclusively handles matters related to housing, employment, accessibility, and transportation. This important legal work is vital to safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities in work environments, and ensuring that employers do not discriminate against them because of disability. Representing clients on employment matters often involves requesting reasonable accommodations under the ADA, and ensuring that the client is provided with an equal and fair work environment as well as adequate opportunities for hire and advancement.

The HEAT team helps ensure that people with disabilities have access and opportunities to rent or own homes and apartments in their communities. This work includes ensuring that landlords and property owners do not discriminate against persons with disabilities in renting or selling property, making sure that housing is accessible to people with disabilities to the extent required by law, and advocating to increase the amount of accessible, affordable and integrated housing for individuals with physical and mental disabilities.

The HEAT team also helps ensure that people with disabilities have full access to private businesses and government facilities, programs and services. This includes working to remove

Also available as part of the eCourse

[2016 Advanced Texas Administrative Law eConference](#)

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