Celebrating Solutions Award
Nomination Form

Legal name of organization: Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

Year established: 1970

Program nominated for award (if different): Legal Assistance to Rural Shelters (LARS) Project

Year established: 1999

Address: 300 South Texas Blvd

City/State/ZIP code: Weslaco, Texas 78596

Contact person: Maricarmen Garza

Title: LARS Project Director, Attorney-at-law

Phone number: 512-374-2737

Fax number: 512-447-3940

E-mail address: mgarza@trla.org

Website address: www.trla.org

Brief description of organization: Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) provides high quality legal assistance and related educational services to low-income Texans

Geographical area served: 68 counties in South, Central, and West Texas

Is the organization tax-exempt under IRS 501 (c) (3) guidelines or a public agency/unit of government? YES

Please check up to five descriptors that best apply to the program you are nominating:

X Shelter-based
___ Counseling
___ Heath care setting
___ Dating violence
___ School/youth violence
X Underserved population
___ Faith-based
___ Elder abuse
X Legal aid/assistance
___ University setting
___ Batterer treatment

___ Prison-based
___ Stalking
X Coalition/collaboration
___ Transitional housing
X Technology/Internet service
___ Employment/training program
___ Victim relocation
___ Hotline service
___ Public awareness/education
___ Other ________________
As one of the goals of the Mary Byron Foundation is to disseminate information about cutting-edge programs and best practices, we wish to post exemplary Celebrating Solutions Award nominations on our website (www.marybyronfoundation.org). Those posted will include the organization’s website address, telephone number, and e-mail address. If you have concerns about this request, please address them to information@marybyronfoundation.org prior to submitting a nomination.

By my signature on this letter, I grant the Mary Byron Foundation permission to use the contents of my nomination for the Celebrating Solutions Award in the manner and for the purposes set above. I further affirm that I am fully authorized to grant such permission to the Mary Byron Foundation.

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 11/10/2009
Celebrating Solutions Award
Program Outline

1. Describe the mission of your organization in five sentences or less.

The mission of Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) is to promote the dignity, self-sufficiency, safety and stability of low-income Texans by providing high quality legal assistance and related educational services. Over the past 39 years, TRLA has provided legal services to low-income people in our service area, which covers 68 counties including the entire Texas/Mexico border. In 2008, TRLA provided legal assistance to more than 22,000 income-eligible Texas residents. TRLA’s services cover a broad variety of practice areas (39 in all) that address the equally broad range of problems confronting the low-income community: fair housing, domestic violence and sexual assault, homelessness, public benefits, economic self-sufficiency, labor and employment, elder law, disability rights, consumer protection, and disaster relief.

2. Describe the most innovative aspects of the program you are submitting for consideration.

TRLA began the Legal Assistance to Rural Shelters (LARS) project in 1999 to meet the need for comprehensive legal services for victims of domestic violence in rural areas of Texas. Through the LARS project partnership, TRLA ensures that at their initial point of contact with a domestic violence shelter, victims receive free, high quality legal assistance that is critical to breaking the cycle of violence.

A research study published in 2003 showed that a woman’s access to legal aid is one of the main factors in reducing intimate partner abuse over the long term.1 By offering victims free legal services at the shelters where they often first turn for help, the LARS project greatly increases victim safety, autonomy and the establishment of a life free from violence.

Legal Assistance to Rural Shelters (LARS) is unique because it is the only service in Texas that links attorneys providing free civil legal aid directly to 23 rural shelters in 68 counties along the Texas-Mexico border. The LARS project service area includes some of the poorest counties in the nation such as Starr, Maverick and Willacy Counties. According to the 2004 U.S. Census, these counties had an average per capita income of $8,416 and an average of 31 percent of people living below the poverty line. Women and children living along the Texas-Mexico border and along the vast stretches of sparsely populated land in South and West Texas have very few options to escape violent relationships, despite the fact that reported cases of abuse are on the rise.

Upon arriving at a shelter, trained shelter advocates are in the best position to document the abuse the victim has endured. During initial talks with the victim, advocates conduct an informal legal service needs assessment while developing a relationship with

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the client and likely earning the client’s trust. **At that point, if the victim desires legal assistance, the shelter advocate will input the client’s information into TRLA’s Client Tracking System (CTS), immediately connecting that client with a TRLA attorney.** The attorney and the shelter advocate have instant access to the same facts, case history, court records, and docket information through the CTS. TRLA attorneys in home offices and shelter advocates in rural areas work collaboratively on the victim's case from start to finish via phone, internet, and a shared database. And because the advocates are trained to record case-essential information in TRLA’s CTS, it is unnecessary for the victim to repeat the trauma of relating the abuse to an attorney.

Another innovative aspect of LARS is the **holistic approach** that is taken to address other legal needs of a domestic violence victim, **including helping clients obtain victims’ compensation, secure housing, and ensuring that employment rights are upheld**. The LARS project provides seamless services for victims of domestic violence from the time they first contact a shelter to the resolution of their various legal issues.

3. **Describe your program’s implementation. What barriers did your organization have to overcome? How did you marshal the necessary resources for implementation?**

Before TRLA began the LARS project in 1999, thousands of victims of domestic violence in rural and underserved areas had very limited access to the legal assistance that is critical in obtaining protective orders against their abusers, securing custody of their children, receiving child support payments, or filing for divorce to break the cycle of violence. Without access to legal aid, victims of domestic violence too often return to their abuser. It became clear that legal aid is a natural complement to the services provided at a victim’s initial point of contact with a domestic violence shelter.

In order to address the dire need for assistance for domestic violence victims, the LARS project was launched in 1999, when TRLA was awarded a Civil Legal Assistance grant from the US Department of Justice Violence Against Women Act. Prior to 1999, TRLA had contract arrangements with many of the collaborating shelters to fund reduced fee legal representation by private attorneys in the communities. Over the past several years, continued project funding has come from the US Department of Justice, the Legal Services Corporation, and private funders. LARS has been awarded grants from foundations such as The Cailloux Foundation, The Coastal Bend Community Foundation, The RGK Foundation, Hervey Foundation, Travis County Women Lawyers’ Foundation, San Antonio Bar Foundation, the James R. Doughtery, Jr. Foundation, and the Texas Bar Foundation.

One main goal of the LARS project is to provide free, high quality, holistic legal services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Additionally, the project aims to ensure that key stakeholders fully understand the rights and remedies guaranteed to victims of violence by the US Justice System in order to improve the overall legal assistance that victims receive.

The LARS project and program goals are carried out by a staff of 12 attorneys who dedicate approximately 50% of their time to LARS cases. TRLA attorney Maricarmen
Garza is the Director of the LARS project and is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day activities and progress of project and partner staff. She consults regularly with the executive directors and legal advocates of all partner organizations to ensure the project is proceeding as planned.

An essential component of the LARS project is an annual conference that brings all shelter partners together for three days of workshops, speakers, and networking. The conference strengthens relationships with shelters and trains shelter staff to help protect domestic violence victims from further violence. The conference is the one place each year that shelter directors and victim advocates can come together with family law attorneys to discuss future collaborative strategies, how to improve our shared computer based client tracking system, critical updates to domestic violence related laws and public policies, as well as challenges faced by the geographic area.

Program Barriers
Due to cuts in federal and state legal aid funding over the past several years, legal aid service providers have had to turn away an increasing number of clients. Currently, there are over 15,000 eligible low-income Texans living in TRLA’s service area for every one TRLA attorney. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of Texas councils of governments’ priority plans have identified “the ongoing shortage of attorneys who can provide pro bono civil legal assistance to victims of domestic violence” as a top challenge to be addressed by local communities throughout the state (Travis County Victims of Crime Task Force Report, 2003).

Traveling to rural regions from home offices requires more resources than traveling in close-in areas. In order to provide services to such a vast 68-county service area (the size of Colorado) TRLA relies on an extensive phone, intranet, and comprehensive database system to stay connected with rural areas. Additionally, TRLA has 14 branch offices, which are spread out across our service area in order to more easily reach rural populations.

LARS partner shelters in rural regions of the state lack even the most basic technology and staff necessary to provide legal services. In order to overcome this obstacle, the LARS Project provides each shelter with at least one computer, internet service, and all expenses paid annual training conference.

Furthermore, other individuals working with victims of violence (such as immigration service providers, pro bono attorneys, judges, law enforcement, and others) from rural regions of the state and along the border have less understanding of the legal rights of these victims, and require more education and training in these areas. Private attorneys in rural areas are less likely to take pro bono domestic violence cases, and therefore, the LARS project provides outreach and training to these attorneys in an organized and systematic way.
4. How do you know your program works? Please site two examples.

By conducting legal services intake at the shelters where survivors first turn for help, the LARS project greatly increases the odds for the survivor's safety and autonomy as well as the establishment of a life free from violence. One major indicator of program achievement is the sheer number of clients whose lives are improved because of LARS. In 2008, the Project served over 750 survivors of domestic violence. With additional shelter partners and personnel, the Project has reached nearly twice as many survivors this year, having served over 1,400 clients to date in 2009. Furthermore, between the 23 shelters, TRLA and pro bono attorneys dedicated 9,347 hours of service to LARS cases in 2008. This translates into over $2.1 million worth of legal services for our clients, who without the help of LARS would not have had access to an attorney.

Aside from quantitative evidence of success, we receive numerous testimonials from clients thanking us for helping them to escape their abusive relationships and move forward with their lives. One LARS client was constantly abused and threatened by her fraudulent husband to never contact immigration about his false citizenship papers. Even after leaving him, he followed, and she had to relocate and change jobs three times. She finally had the courage to get a divorce and notify immigration in hopes that the violence would end. In a thank you letter to a LARS attorney, she writes “Everyday I still struggle with stress of his threats. May God bless you and your work helping women become free from abuse.”

Another indicator that the LARS project works is the continuous growth and numerous requests from shelters for LARS assistance. In 1999, the LARS project began with twelve shelters, and has now expanded to 23. Largely due to word-of-mouth, shelters have seen the impact of legal services on their clients, and have requested that the LARS project become an integral part of their services. Some of the larger shelters have even offered to solicit funding in order to hire more LARS attorneys for their clients.

In addition to client testimonials and continued requests from shelters to partner, the LARS project attorneys have received awards from the State Bar of Texas Poverty Law Section’s 2009 Impact Litigation Award (2009), the Coalition for Crime Victims Rights Impact Award (2007), the Laredo-Webb County Bar Association Law Day Award (2009), and the Hope Alliance Health and Human Services Leadership Award (2007). These awards demonstrate the positive impact LARS is making in central, south and west Texas.

5. Who are your key partners? What are their roles?

The shelter advocates are an essential component to the Legal Access to Rural Shelters (LARS) project. The advocates are directly responsible for informing the victim of her legal rights, explaining the availability of legal aid, and connecting the victim with a TRLA attorney. LARS currently partners with 23 shelters and crisis centers serving 68 counties in South, Central, and West Texas.
The partner shelters include: Family Crisis Center of the Big Bend (Alpine), Friendship of Women (Brownsville), Winter Garden Women’s Shelter (Carrizo Springs), Center Against Family Violence (El Paso), La Posada Home, Inc. (El Paso), Family Crisis Center (Harlingen), Southwest Family Life Center (Hondo), Hill Country Crisis Council (Kerrville), Casa de Misericordia (Laredo), Mujeres Unidas (McAllen), Crisis Center of Comal County (New Braunfels), Guadalupe Family Violence Shelter (Seguin), Atascosa Family Crisis Center (Pleasanton), Family Crisis Center (Bastrop), Hays-Caldwell Women’s Center (San Marcos), Highland Lakes Family Crisis Center (Marble Falls), Mid-Coast Family Services (Victoria), Hope of South Texas, Inc. (Victoria), the Women’s Shelter of South Texas (Corpus Christi), Family Violence Prevention Services (San Antonio), Williamson County Crisis Center (Round Rock), and Safeplace (Austin).

In addition to shelter partners, the LARS project is involved in important networks across the state of Texas. One of these collaborations includes the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV), who recently supported TRLA’s application for a Legal Assistance for Victims grant. TCFV wrote:

“As the Texas domestic violence coalition, TCFV is familiar with TRLA’s history and commitment of providing comprehensive and holistic legal services to the most underserved communities in Texas. With its Client Tracking System (CTS database), TRLA has built partnerships with even the most remote victim services providers in Texas, and by doing so, has afforded a wide range of legal options to traditionally underserved populations.”

By collaborating with key stakeholders such as TCFV, the LARS project is able to continuously learn and seek out innovative ways to meet the needs of domestic violence victims. The LARS project is dedicated to consistent monitoring and evaluation of services in order to provide the highest level of legal services for domestic violence victims.

6. Could/should your program be replicated in other areas of the country? Why?

The Legal Assistance to Rural Shelters (LARS) project provides an efficient, cost-effective, and collaborative approach to providing legal assistance to low-income victims of violence. The LARS project serves as a model for other legal services providers and domestic violence shelters seeking to create strong collaborative networks. It is also a model in how to utilize telecommunications and computer technology as powerful tools to quickly and effectively meet the needs of violence victims in rural areas. Our larger goals for this project are to add additional shelters to the LARS partnership and to share the LARS model with other legal aid providers in the United States.

Furthermore, the model of connecting attorneys to rural social services centers is being replicated through TRLA’s Sexual Assault Legal Assistance Network (SALAN) which provides civil legal services for victims of non-intimate partner sexual assault in our service area. Utilizing the same model of training and technology-based client intake, SALAN now partners with four rural rape crisis centers in addition to the dual service shelters served by the LARS project.
June 25, 2010

Dear Ms. Roth,

We are thrilled that Texas RioGrande Legal Aid’s Legal Alliance for Survivors of Abuse (LASA) Project has been chosen as a semi-finalist for the Mary Byron Project’s Celebrating Solutions Award! Several of our closest partners, SafePlace and Texas Council on Family Violence, have received this prestigious award in years past, and it would be an honor to join the ranks of such well-respected organizations.

I have enclosed the information you requested in order for the selection committee to move forward in choosing the award recipient. Should you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at mgarza@trla.org or telephone at 512-374-2737. Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Maricarmen Garza
LASA Project Director
Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc.
Mary Byron Project  
Semi-Finalist Questions  
Submitted by: Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA)  
Legal Alliance for Survivors of Abuse (LASA) Project

1. **What is the approximate number of individuals served annually by the applicant or nominee?**

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) provides legal assistance and related educational outreach to more than 22,000 individuals annually. The Legal Alliance for Survivors of Abuse (LASA) Project serves approximately 600 individuals each year. About 100 of these individuals receive extended legal services.

In 2009, LASA closed 610 cases, affecting the lives of approximately 1,802 clients and their children. Of those cases, 71 percent of clients were Hispanic, 21 percent were Caucasian, and 4 percent were African American. Many clients were immigrants, disabled, homeless, or veterans. More than one quarter of these clients lived in rural counties without access to basic social services.

The LASA project provides legal services to those that otherwise would not be able to afford an attorney. Over 56 percent of the clients served last year had incomes at or below 50 percent of the federal poverty level (less than $11,025 annually for a family of four). Another 27 percent had incomes at 100 percent of the federal poverty level or below, while the remaining 17 percent had incomes between 100 and 200 percent over poverty (less than $44,100 for a family of four).

Furthermore, in 2009, through the LASA collaboration, TRLA and pro bono attorneys dedicated more than 13,000 hours of legal services to victims. This translates into over $2 million worth of legal services for our clients, who without the help of LASA would not have been able to access an attorney.

2. **How many paid staff and volunteers are used to administer the nominated program?**

There are approximately 5.5 full time equivalent attorneys dedicated to the entire LASA Project who are supervised by Project Director Maricarmen Garza.

3. **Are there past awards, accolades, and grants furnished upon the applicant or nominee that would further exemplify its success in combating domestic violence?**

As an organization with over 30 years of experience combating domestic violence, TRLA has received numerous awards and grants related to our legal services for victims. Recent awards received by LASA Project attorneys include:

- State Bar of Texas Poverty Law Section’s 2009 Impact Litigation Award (April 2009)
- Coalition for Crime Victims Rights Impact Award (April 2007)
- Laredo-Webb County Bar Association Law Day Award (April 2009)
- Hope Alliance Health and Human Services Leadership Award (October 2007)

Additionally, in 2007 the American Bar Association’s Commission of Domestic Violence invited LASA Project attorney Laura Martinez to co-author and develop a handbook entitled “Standards of Practice for Lawyers Representing Victims of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking”. This resource guide was distributed nationwide to attorneys serving victims of domestic violence.

Over the past 3 years, the LASA Project has been awarded grants from government sources such as the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, the Legal Services Corporation, and Office of the Governor, Criminal Justice Division. The Project has received funding from private foundations including The Cailloux Foundation, The Coastal Bend Community Foundation, The RGK Foundation, Hervey Foundation, Travis County Women Lawyers’ Foundation, San Antonio Bar Foundation, H-E-B, the Bexar County Women’s Bar Foundation, the James R. Dougherty, Jr. Foundation, and the Texas Bar Foundation.

4. If funding were not an issue, what (if any) changes or additions would you make to your program in the future?

Currently, there are 11 attorneys assigned to the LASA project, which covers a 68-county area and includes 25 partner organizations. Each attorney dedicates approximately 50 percent of their time to LASA cases, which is the equivalent of 5.5 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) attorneys for the entire project. If funding were not an issue, TRLA would double the number of attorneys working on the LASA Project, resulting in approximately 12 FTE attorneys. Based on annual questionnaires TRLA sends to each partner and their advocates, the number one way that the project could improve would be by adding additional attorneys. By increasing the number of attorneys on the project, each partner organization would be able to refer more of their clients to LASA attorneys, and the project would be able to help far more clients escape their abusive relationships.

5. Does your agency have a work place policy in effect that addresses the safety and needs of employees who are victims of domestic violence?

TRLA is currently developing a work place policy addressing the safety and needs of employees who are victims of domestic violence. Once the suggested policy is finalized, it will be placed on the agenda for approval by TRLA’s Board of Directors at the next Board meeting in November. Once approved, it will be officially incorporated into the employee handbook.
TRLA’s Employee Handbook contains policies addressing workplace violence and sexual harassment. TRLA expressly prohibits any acts or threats of violence any TRLA employee against any other employee, client or visitor in or about TRLA’s facilities or elsewhere at any time. TRLA also will not condone any acts or threats of violence against TRLA’s employees, clients, or visitors on TRLA’s premises at any time or while they are engaged in business with or on behalf of TRLA, on or off TRLA’s premises. With respect to sexual harassment, TRLA prohibits unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favors, and all other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. TRLA’s flexible leave policies allow anyone who is a victim of domestic violence to have ample time off of work to deal with these matters physically, mentally, and legally.

Furthermore, the LASA Project Director is supporting the work of the Texas Council on Family Violence to introduce a bill in the next Texas Legislative session implementing mandatory specific leave policies for employees who have suffered from domestic violence.

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**Specific Questions for TRLA:**

1. **How do you keep client information confidential with your tracking system? How do you safeguard client information that could become a safety issue if the perpetrator gains access to the system?**

Victim safety is of the utmost concern to TRLA. To protect the security and integrity of our computer network and the CTS, the TRLA Technology Department has a Security Management System in place. The system includes a robust firewall, a server Antivirus software, and password authentication. The CTS has several anti-hacking features, including a private intranet network that is only accessible with an authorized user’s social security number. Although highly unlikely that a perpetrator gain access to the system, this feature would prevent that person from seeing client information.

Additionally, TRLA trains victim advocates on how to protect the client’s privacy when they enter data into the CTS. There are several mechanisms that can be utilized to protect the client. These include a “Do not disclose client address” check box that prevents the printing of any client address information on correspondence and legal pleadings, a “Flashing Alert” note that is added to the client record noting something crucial to the client’s safety, and a “Private” check box which prevents any staff, except the attorney handling the case and anyone they designate, from viewing the client record and associated logs. Advocates trained to use the CTS sign an agreement that they will abide by the Rules that govern attorneys when it comes to confidentiality/privilege.

2. **Are all your clients shelter-based? If so, are you able to refer non-sheltered victims to a similar legal service? If not, what do you do?**
TRLA provides legal aid to all eligible domestic violence clients regardless of if they are shelter-based or not.

However, TRLA’s LASA Project is a collaborative effort with shelters and crisis centers and therefore specifically serves clients that are receiving services of a domestic violence shelter or rape crisis center. Most of the LASA Project’s 25 partners provide both shelter and non-residential services, such as counseling, advocacy or job skills.

In addition to the LASA Project, TRLA’s Family Law team provides the same services to victims who contact us through the Telephone Access to Justice Project or who walk in the doors of one of our offices. For those clients not coming to TRLA through a service provider, we will determine the provider nearest them and refer them back for shelter and/or other non-residential services. In this manner, all TRLA clients receive services consistent with our holistic and collaborative approach to legal aid.

Furthermore, clients often need assistance with long-term and preventive issues arising as a consequence of violence. Under this holistic approach, LASA Project attorneys and shelter partner staff find it is not uncommon for victims who initially request a service related to the abuse they have suffered to also have several tangential legal needs, such as housing, immigration and public benefits. With TRLA attorneys experienced in 39 practice areas, LASA is equipped to provide comprehensive services to low-income clients facing a broad range of problems.

3. Have you found any instance in which Legal Aid represented the abusive partner in a divorce or other matter? If so, how did you resolve the conflict?

No, TRLA has never represented an abusive partner in a divorce or other matter. As part of our client intake process, we perform a conflict of interest check using our client tracking system. Having said that, we are aware of batterers’ tendency to pretend to be a victim and falsely allege that their victim is the real perpetrator. However, because of attorneys’ and advocates’ extensive training, our deliberate screening process, and our understanding of domestic violence dynamics, we have never been in a position of representing a perpetrator. By the time a case has been accepted and social workers and attorneys have begun work on the case, TRLA has screened out these batterers.

In addition, it has come to our attention that fathers’ rights groups have called and initiated cases on behalf of fathers, in attempts to conflict a victim out of representation. Should a conflict like this occur, TRLA is able to refer victims to other organizations that can provide similar legal services. TRLA has never provided extended legal services to a perpetrator.

4. Is there a screening mechanism for potential clients?
Yes, there is a screening mechanism for potential clients. Victim advocates at partner domestic violence and sexual assault service providers are trained on how to use TRLA’s client tracking system. This system uses a standardized screening mechanism, including questions regarding income qualifications and other demographic information. TRLA also identifies clients with high priority cases such as lethality and extreme violence and serves those clients before others.

In general, to qualify for free legal services from TRLA, an applicant must meet the income, asset and immigration requirements established by the United States Congress, the Texas Legislature, and by various funding sources. However, TRLA is allowed to accept a limited number of cases on behalf of domestic violence victims without regard to these guidelines.

5. **Have any of your shelter advocates gone on to become attorneys after your training?**

Yes, one advocate who worked at the Hays-Caldwell Women’s Center in San Marcos, Texas has gone on to become an attorney in San Antonio. Another advocate is currently in the process of applying to law schools and plans to attend a Texas law school in the fall of 2009.

6. **How do you deal with victims who are residing illegally in the United States?**

TRLA and the LASA project are allowed to serve all domestic violence victims regardless of immigration status. Specifically, LASA project attorneys and advocates help undocumented immigrants to file Violence Against Women Act Self-Petitions and to obtain U Visas and T Visas. These remedies also provide protection to the victims’ family members. When necessary to provide comprehensive legal and social services, the LASA project can also refer undocumented persons to local service providers whose work in the community specifically targets that population.
June 21, 2010

Ms. Marcia Roth, Executive Director
The Mary Byron Project
10401 Linn Station Road
Louisville, KY 40223

RE: Letter of support

Dear Ms. Roth,

Since 1978, the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) has been a nationally recognized leader in the efforts to end family violence through partnerships, advocacy and direct services for women, children and men. As one of the largest domestic violence coalitions in the nation, TCFV’s membership is comprised of family violence service providers, supportive organizations, survivors of domestic violence, businesses and professionals, communities of faith and other concerned citizens.

TCFV collaborates with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) in their efforts to prevent family violence in Texas, and we are pleased to submit this letter in support of the Legal Alliance for Survivors of Abuse (LASA) Project. There are several ways in which TRLA and TCFV collaborate: First, our staff are often invited to speak at the annual LASA Conference which includes local domestic violence service providers, family law attorneys, and other professionals; Second, we refer victims and victim serving agencies to the LASA Project when they are in need of legal services; and Third, we invite LASA Project staff to strategic meetings and other forums in order to learn from their experiences providing legal services to family violence survivors.

The LASA Project is a unique and innovative project that clearly deserves the Mary Byron Project’s Celebrating Solutions Award. Research has shown that when family violence victims can access legal services, they are less likely to return to their abuser. The LASA Project allows victims in the most remote and isolated areas of our state to receive legal assistance, greatly increasing their chances at breaking the cycle of violence.

Sincerely,

Gloria Aguilera Terry
President
Ms. Marcia Roth
Executive Director
Mary Byron Foundation
10401 Linn Station Rd
Louisville, Kentucky 40223

Dear Ms. Roth:

I am pleased to submit this letter of support of Texas RioGrande Legal Aid’s Legal Alliance for Survivors of Abuse (LASA) Project and its receipt of the Celebrating Solutions Award.

In 2008, the Texas Department of Public Safety reported 193,505 incidents of domestic violence in Texas. Of these incidents, 57,357 were reported in the Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) 68-county service area. For thousands of domestic violence victims, legal services are often inaccessible, unaffordable, and unavailable. A victim of violence who lives in a rural area cannot depend on receiving the legal advocacy and representation that they need in order to secure protective orders, divorces, and child custody against an abusive spouse or partner. That’s why the work of the LASA Project is so important.

The LASA Project was established in 1999 to provide free legal services to rural victims of domestic violence. It is an extremely unique and effective project because it involves collaborations with 25 organizations serving victims of violence. The majority of these partner organizations are located in rural parts of Texas, and their clients would not otherwise have access to the legal services necessary to break the cycle of violence. The LASA Project partnership allows victims to apply for and receive assistance from an attorney directly upon their arrival at a shelter.

The LASA Project is an excellent example of how cross-entity collaborations can help victims become survivors. I appreciate the opportunity to submit this letter of support of this important project.

Sincerely,

Lloyd Doggett
June 17, 2010

Ms. Marcia Roth
Executive Director
Mary Byron Project
19401 Linn Station Road
Louisville, KY 40223

RE: Letter of Support for TRLA’s Celebrating Solutions Award Nomination

Dear Ms. Roth,

Safe Place, a non-profit agency serving survivors of domestic/sexual violence in Austin, Texas and a previous recipient of the Celebrating Solutions Award, is writing to express our support of Texas RioGrande Legal Aid’s (TRLA’s) nomination for this award. SafePlace is a strong supporter of TRLA’s Legal Alliance for Survivors of Abuse (LASA) Project, both its work in our community and the access to critical legal services it provides for rural domestic violence programs across Texas.

SafePlace has collaborated with TRLA for almost 30 years, including in the LASA Project, to which we refer our clients for help with obtaining a protective order, divorce, child support or child custody. Our legal advocacy staff is trained through the LASA Project to: identify a client’s legal needs; conduct client intake; and work with the assigned LASA attorney to ensure that our clients can access legal remedies which keep them and their children safe. The partnership between SafePlace and TRLA has been an important part of our services for survivors of violence.

We have seen firsthand the impact of the LASA Project on breaking the cycle of violence. When a woman is able to obtain a protective order and a divorce, she is far less likely to return to her batterer. The LASA Project helps provide a safety net that supports survivors in rebuilding their lives free from violence. Thank you for your consideration of this valuable project for the Celebrating Solutions Award.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Julia E. Spann, MSW
Executive Director

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Julia Spann
Gentlemen:

Based on information supplied, and assuming your operations will be as stated in your application for recognition of exemption, we have determined you are exempt from Federal income tax under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. We have further determined you are not a private foundation within the meaning of section 509(a) of the Code, because you are an organization described in section 170(c)(1)(A)-(vi).

You are not liable for social security (FICA) taxes unless you file a waiver of exemption certificate as provided in the Federal Insurance Contributions Act. You are not liable for the taxes imposed under the Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA).

Since you are not a private foundation, you are not subject to the excise taxes under Chapter 42 of the Code. However, you are not automatically exempt from other Federal excise taxes.

Donors may deduct contributions to you as provided in section 170 of the Code. Bequests, legacies, devises, transfers, or gifts to you or for your use are deductible for Federal estate and gift tax purposes under sections 2055, 2106, and 2522 of the Code.

If your purposes, character, or method of operation is changed, you must let us know so we can consider the effect of the change on your exempt status. Also, you must inform us of all changes in your name or address.

If your gross receipts each year are normally more than $5,000, you are required to file Form 990, Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax, by the 15th day of the fifth month after the end of your annual accounting period. The law imposes a penalty of $10 a day, up to a maximum of $5,000, for failure to file a return on time.

You are not required to file Federal income tax returns unless you are subject to the tax on unrelated business income under section 511 of the Code. If you are subject to this tax, you must file an income tax return on Form 990-T. In this letter we are not determining whether any of your present or proposed activities are unrelated trade or business as defined in section 513 of the Code.

You need an employer identification number even if you have no employees. If an employer identification number was not entered on your application, a number will be assigned to you and you will be advised of it. Please use that number on all returns you file and in all correspondence with the Internal Revenue Service.

Please keep this determination letter in your permanent records. This is a determination letter, revoking our letter of September 1, 1971.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

R. L. Phinney
District Director

cc: Mitchell Rogovin
Washington, D. C. 20036
Dear Sir or Madam:

By our determination dated November 22, 1971, you were held to be exempt from Federal Income Tax under the provisions of section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

You recently furnished us information that Costal Bend Legal Services merged with Texas Rural Legal Aid Inc. on June 25, 2002. You also informed us that your name has been changed to Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc. Based on the information submitted, we have determined that the merger does not affect your exempt status and we have updated our records to reflect your current name as shown above. The organization will continue using Employer Identification Number 74-1675230.

Please let us know about any further changes in the character, purposes, method of operation, name or address of your organization.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact the person whose name and telephone number appear in the heading of this letter.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Director, Exempt Organizations

Enclosure