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## Best Legal Departments: Texas In-House Attorneys Brought in \$1.3M for Access to Justice

The efforts of the Equal Access to Justice Campaign led to a total donation of \$1,313,393.13 and increased the number of donors by 57% to 813 from the previous year.

By Dan Clark | September 08, 2021



***L-R: Meyling Ortiz, managing counsel at Toyota of North America, Vicki Blanton, senior legal counsel at AT&T, Rocío Cristina García Espinoza, senior counsel at Rosewood Property Co., and Jeffrey Melucci general counsel of Kimberly-Clark. Courtesy photos***

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## **Winner: Outstanding Community Service Award**

Connecting people in need with good pro bono counsel, and finding donors to finance that work, is hard enough. Work-from-home orders and the unknown of the pandemic made it more difficult for those organizing localized access to justice programs.

So a group of in-house attorneys from different companies in the greater Dallas area, learning from what corporations and law firms did during the pandemic, went outside their usual geographic boundaries in seeking support for the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program and its Equal Access to Justice Campaign.

AT&T senior counsel Vicki Blanton, Toyota of North America managing counsel Meyling Ortiz and Rosewood Property Co. senior counsel Rocío Cristina García Espinoza were co-chairs of the organization in 2020. In addition, Kimberly-Clark general counsel Jeff Melucci, who was named honorary chair of the program, took on an active role in the effort.

The program, which has been in place since 1997, is designed to provide pro bono services to low-income residents in Dallas County and largely relies on donations.

At the beginning of 2020, Blanton said, the group was looking forward to meeting the previous year's fundraising goal of \$1.25 million. But the inability to meet with donors face-to-face presented problems.

Using lessons learned in the work-from-home environment, they found a way to reach potential donors. The campaign held a virtual wine tasting event and a virtual fashion show sponsored by Neiman Marcus to bring in donations.

She said the evolution of working from home and being able to communicate across the country led to even greater donations.

"We had a record-breaking campaign, which was more phenomenal given the environment of the pandemic," Blanton said. "The hybrid events opened us up to a brand new audience."

They met their goal and then some. The virtual fundraising efforts of the Equal Access to Justice Campaign brought in more than \$1.31 million in total donations and increased the number of donors by 57% from the previous year.

Fundraising isn't all that went virtual.

In 2020, the campaign held 80 neighborhood clinics and 16 specialized clinics throughout the year. The clinics were converted to online events where applicants met through Zoom with volunteer attorneys. The organization also held 63 pro se clinics where volunteers helped to prepare those who were representing themselves in court.

Volunteers also helped defend tenants who could not pay their rent when landlords threatened to evict them during the pandemic. The campaign referred 830 cases to volunteer attorneys and had 898 cases pending as of December 31, 2020.

Blanton said she continues to represent AT&T when she participates in pro bono activity.

“Corporations are citizens of the community they are based in,” Blanton said. “We want our customers to know that we care and that we are engaged with them and their lives.”

She said in her efforts she had support from AT&T general counsel David McAtee even with a big project such as the spin-off of Direct TV. “He took time to stop and tell me that the company is supporting legal aid and they would be making their usual donation to Equal Access to Justice,” she said.

Garcia, Blanton and Ortiz are no longer chairs of the program and have turned it over to three new chairs. Even when the pandemic subsides, Blanton hopes the reach for donors will go beyond Dallas County.

“That is one record I would be happy to have broken,” Blanton said.

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