



*Women*  
**in Law**

# San Antonio Legal Services Association

By Blithe Wiley  
Photography Sarah Dingivan by David Teran

Today, approximately one-fifth of San Antonians live in poverty. For all too many of these individuals, affording civil legal representation is completely beyond reach in times of need, such as a divorce, a child custody case, or settling an estate.

The San Antonio Legal Services Association (SALSA) was created to help low-income and disadvantaged individuals and families secure the legal services they need. It was established in 2019 as the new incarnation of the Community Justice Program (CJP), which served underrepresented populations for nearly 20 years. Each year, approximately 350 local attorneys from across the legal spectrum volunteer their time to work with SALSA's community partners to transform the lives of those in need.

Sarah Dingivan joined the CJP in 2017 as managing attorney. When SALSA was established in 2019, she was named CEO. Today she leads SALSA in working to prevent homelessness, protect individual rights and advocate for vulnerable populations.

"The work we do in our community is so rewarding," Dingivan said. "We identify the legal needs in our community and work to create solutions that are holistic and not just a band-aid."

Among the legal services provided by SALSA are several legal clinics, including the Wills Clinic and Veterans Legal



Advice Clinic. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit San Antonio, the need for legal services multiplied overnight.

"COVID's impact on our community resulted in so many people being unable to pay their rent. We created a Tenants' Rights Program to assist residents on the brink of homelessness," explained Dingivan. "We also set up the Small Estate Clinic when the death toll from COVID was super high, and the Probate Courts were becoming inundated with requests for assistance from pro se applicants. This was created to help shepherd families through their options."

SALSA also launched the Wills for Healthcare Workers Program for healthcare workers when COVID-19 tore through the community. "In 2020, I received a call from one of SALSA's Board members asking for attorney volunteers for the Wills for Healthcare Workers Program," said Laura O'Donnell, partner at Haynes and Boone LLP. "It broke my heart to think about these health care heroes in this time of need, and I, along with many other attorneys at my firm, volunteered to serve in this clinic. Helping these individuals was so rewarding for me."



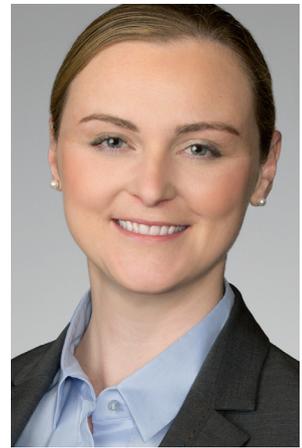
Alicia Grant



Laura O'Donnell



Danielle Rusing



Tanya Feinleib

Tanya Feinleib, an estate planning attorney with Langley & Banack, has volunteered with SALSA and CJP for more than a decade. She now serves as a mentor for other attorneys in the Wills Clinic. “With these clinics, we provide needed legal services for low-income residents,” said Feinleib. “My role as mentor is to train lawyer volunteers who may not specialize in estate planning. It’s such a great feeling to spend a few hours with these low-income clients and have them walk away with a complete set of estate planning documents that are signed and notarized.”

Dykema Senior Attorney Danielle Rushing began volunteering with CJP while still a law student at St. Mary’s University and continues to volunteer with SALSA in the Wills Clinic, Veterans Legal Advice Clinic, and Alternatives to Guardianship Clinic for disabled adults. “Helping others and being able to make a difference through my volunteer work with SALSA is a humbling and rewarding experience,” Rushing said. “I’ll never forget a couple’s tears of joy after I helped with their wills. Securing their future, and the magnitude of what that meant to them was an insurmountable feeling.”

Alicia Grant, Senior Associate at Norton Rose Fulbright US, serves on SALSA’s Board of Directors and frequently provides pro bono legal services for the organization. She has worked with the Wills Clinic, Family Law Clinic, and Cyberbullying Clinic called the DBM (Don’t Bully Me) Clinic that SALSA developed in partnership with David’s Legacy Foundation. “I started volunteering with CJP as a law student at St. Mary’s,” Grant said. “These volunteer opportunities enabled me to be a much better attorney and helped me connect with mentors. As an attorney, it’s so rewarding to provide pro bono help to people who can’t afford much-needed legal services.”

Dingivan noted that SALSA’s legal services outreach continues to expand to reach additional areas of need in San Antonio and surrounding communities. “Today, we have an office at Haven for Hope to provide legal services, and we have a Veterans Legal Services operation next to St. Philip’s College. Also, we will be working with the Multi-Assistance Center at Morgan’s Wonderland, where we will be doing clinics benefitting disabled community members and their caretakers.”

In the aftermath of the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, SALSA has mounted a Disaster Response Effort for the families affected by this tragedy. The organization is recruiting Texas attorneys to provide extended representation services to impacted families. “We are partnering with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) to triage the cases in Uvalde, as TRLA has a huge pool of in-house experts in many different legal areas.”

Dingivan noted that SALSA works with numerous organizations throughout the community to provide a wide range of legal services. “We have wonderful community partners that help us make a positive impact on the lives of so many people.”

All of these legal services require funding to operate successfully. Dingivan noted that SALSA relies heavily on both individual and corporate giving to make these services possible. “Individuals and corporations that make a gift to SALSA have a direct impact on our work to change lives in our communities,” she said. “We are always incredibly appreciative of support from those in our community.”

Donations can be made at [www.sa-lsa.org/donate](http://www.sa-lsa.org/donate).