

## PRO BONO HOT LIST | A SPECIAL REPORT

In the past year, lawyers fought for the disabled, voting rights and women's health. They volunteered their services for those who bravely serve our country—helping some secure citizenship and others maintain their right to religious freedom. They helped connect the community and law enforcement in Chicago and San Francisco, advocated for Texas foster children and worked to improve health care in South Dakota. These are their stories. —Lisa Helem

**YETTER COLEMAN**

### Fighting for 12,000 Texas Foster Children

**SOME OF THE MOST DRAMATIC CHANGES** in Texans' lives have come as a result of lawyers deciding to sue the state in federal court. Prisons, public schools and housing are all better for those attorneys' efforts.

Houston lawyer Paul Yetter and his law firm Yetter Coleman could think of no better cause than protecting 12,000 of the most endangered children in Texas' foster care system. So he pursued a pro bono project on their behalf that did just that.

"The stories were just horrible. These are children all across the state that have been in foster care for more than a year," Yetter said. "Many of them spend the rest of their childhood in foster care, age out of the system, end up on the streets and have a terrible outcome."

Twelve years ago, Yetter and his firm took on the daunting task of trying to reform the Texas foster care system. They wanted to give a voice to a group of kids who had no political power and no champions.

"We looked at this as a chance to make a big difference in our world," Yetter said. "We saw it more as a privilege rather than a burden."

Yetter led a team of seven pro bono counsel from his firm in preparing a class action on behalf of those 12,000 foster care children, suing the state for violating their 14th Amendment due process rights.

He also joined forces with other lawyers who were looking for the best way to legally force Texas to improve its foster care system.

"We teamed up with some public interest groups, and they were looking at it coincidentally at the same time we were looking for a project," Yetter said. "It was a perfect match."

In late 2015, after two rounds of class certification and two interlocutory appeals, U.S. District Judge Janis Jack of the Southern District of Texas found that the state violated the plaintiffs' rights to be free from unreasonable risk of harm caused by the state.

In March 2016, Jack appointed two independent special masters to craft targeted reforms to the foster care system. And in 2017, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott called on the Texas Legislature to allocate \$500 million in new appropriations to overhaul and fix the foster care system.

Yetter, whose team included partners Reagan Simpson and Dori Kornfeld Goldman, was joined in his firm's efforts by Sara Bartosz, lead counsel for the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Children's Rights.

"The Yetter firm and Paul Yetter himself devoted so much time, energy and heart in this case," Bartosz said. "They really took the extra step and the extra mile for the children of Texas."

—JOHN COUNCIL



PAUL YETTER

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**YetterColeman LLP**  
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