Supreme Court Advisory Committee
Supreme Court of Texas
P.O. Box 12248
Austin, Texas 78711-2248

Re: Supreme Court Uniform Forms

Dear Members of the Committee:

Texas Advocacy Project (formerly Women's Advocacy Project) is a statewide, nonprofit, legal organization that provides free legal services to help Texas women who are experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault. Started in 1982 as a legal hotline, the agency has evolved as an expert on legal issues affecting survivors of interpersonal violence. We now provide a range of family law legal and training services that promote the use of legal protections to end violence against women. Our attorneys are committed to ensuring that victims in Texas have effective access to the judicial system.

We are here today to express our strong support for the creation of standardized, Court-approved forms.

All told, the Project provided legal services in 5,353 cases in 2011, serving over 12,113 low income Texans. In addition, the Project's training services provided training resources to 1765 judges, prosecutors, crime victim services personnel, legal advocates, medical professionals, and others. Our Technical Advocate assisted 2,290 clients and their children with a broad range of advocacy services allowing them to access important resources like Crime Victims Compensation funds and extensions of protective orders when their abusers were soon to be released from prison. The Project's statewide programs served clients in 180 out of 254 Texas counties last year representing over 97% of the state's population. Our clients are the poorest of the poor. About 90% of them eligible to receive food stamp benefits.

Texas Advocacy Project operates three statewide legal advice hotlines: the Family Violence Legal Line, the Sexual Assault Legal Line, and the Family Law Hotline. Each day, we hear the difficulties of those who cannot afford a lawyer and who cannot get help through legal aid. For those who need a protective order, we are thankfully able to provide them with the Court-approved protective order forms. We have seen first-hand how these forms have both protected and changed lives. We have seen women be freed of years of abuse. And, possibly more remarkably, we have seen women empowered by using the forms.

We support the use of Court-approved pro se forms—like the ones being proposed today-- in uncomplicated divorces. Each year, thousands call our family law hotlines seeking legal advice. The majority of them have no property and many have no minor children. By their nature, their cases are legally simple. They are the type of cases in which forms are generated by paralegals in family law firms using ProDoc. There are currently several sources of forms readily available to these clients. The issue is not the availability of forms as much as that the content of the forms varies widely. Without uniformity in the forms, there is no guarantee

that the forms include correct legal information. Further, the client cannot be assured that the court will accept the form. We commonly hear from callers that counties will not accept pro se forms, that certain courts will only accept "their" form, or that the court will not accept pro se forms in which changes have been made in pen, or where blanks are not filled in by typewriter. All of these issues pose significant access to justice problems for callers who are living at or below the poverty level and may be missing work or without childcare for future court appearances. Not to mention the unique burden all of this poses on victims of family violence. We strongly believe that a Court-approved divorce form would significantly alleviate many of these issues.

While we believe it is always best to have a lawyer, and we continue to strive to reach that goal, it is important that we help those who do not have access to one. It is for this reason that we call upon the Court to adopt the Divorce Kit proposed by the Supreme Court Uniform Forms Task Force.

Sincerely,

Andrea Sloan
Executive Director

Denise Margo Moy
Legal Director