



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Chris Bugbee

512-287-2018

**First Lady Cecilia Abbott, OneStar Foundation Announce
2020 Governor's Volunteer Awards Recipients**

AUSTIN, TEXAS – Texas First Lady Cecilia Abbott, Honorary Chair of the 2020 Governor's Volunteer Awards, today announced the recipients of the 37th annual Governor's Volunteer Awards. These awards — presented in conjunction with OneStar Foundation — honor the exemplary service of individuals, groups, and organizations that have made a significant and measurable contribution to Texas communities through service and volunteering in the past year.

"The irrepressible spirit of service shines brightly in Texas," the First Lady said. "I am honored to celebrate the extraordinary generosity of these 12 outstanding awardees, who have found selfless and compassionate solutions to strengthen their communities."

OneStar Foundation was created to support the State of Texas by strengthening the nonprofit sector, encouraging civic engagement through service and volunteering, promoting innovative strategies to address local issues, and facilitating public-private partnerships to expand the reach of the sector. OneStar Foundation is the Governor-designated National Service Commission in Texas and administers the AmeriCorps State grant program. OneStar is also home to Texas' Faith-Based and Community Initiative. OneStar Foundation connects partners and resources to build a stronger nonprofit sector in Texas. Learn more at onestarfoundation.org.

The recipients of the 2020 Governor's Volunteer Awards are:

Governor's Lone Star Achievement Award: Bill Gilliland (Abilene)

Since 1990, Bill Gilliland has devoted himself to making "Christmas Lane" at the Abilene State Supported Living Center the region's essential holiday destination. 2019 marked the 30th anniversary of this beloved seasonal tradition, which features more than 100 festive displays and hosts thousands of guests from across the region. The community extravaganza generates free-will donations from guests for the state-supported living center, which provides direct services and assistance to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Bill devotes more than 500 hours in service each year to coordinating Christmas Lane, and he has been instrumental in various fundraising events that have raised more than \$650,000 in medical upgrades for the center.

First Lady's Rising Star Award: Annie Zhu & Shirley Zhu (Houston)

Twin sisters Annie Zhu & Shirley Zhu (17) take decisive action when they see a need in their community. To tackle the issue of food insecurity in Houston, they launched Project Fresh Hub, a student-led volunteer service initiative dedicated to providing under-served communities with rescued food. From April 2018 to October 2020, the two young women led 18 food distribution events, rescuing 11,800

pounds of unsold fresh produce and bread from grocery stores and delivering them to 1,550 residents in food deserts. Upon learning about budget cuts in their school district, Annie and Shirley also started summer math camps and workshops in 2019 that helped more than 90 fourth- through sixth-graders prepare for their standardized tests.

First Lady's Rising Star Award: The Three Mask-eteers (*Houston*)

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Amar Sehgal (17), Karthik Bhagavatula (15), and Praneel Bhagavatula (13)— known as “The Three Mask-eteers”—banded together to apply their ingenuity and community spirit toward designing and producing high-quality, long-use masks that have aided Houstonians and other Texans in falling prey to the deadly virus. The team spent weeks researching and developing a reusable 3-D printed mask prototype with disposable filters, then collaborated with Environmental Officers at local hospitals to further refine the mask design. Over the course of five months, more than 200 masks and 2,000 filters have been distributed at no cost to vulnerable populations across the state, including healthcare workers and first responders.

Partners in Education Award: The Women's Fund for Health Education and Resiliency (*Houston*)

The Women's Fund understands that “good health promotes education, and education promotes good health.” For more than 40 years, The Women's Fund has provided creative and effective health education programs for at-risk adolescent girls in the Greater Houston community. Their programs engage well-trained volunteers to serve as mentors and facilitators at campuses and community centers across the Houston area, and the organization collaborates closely with health professionals and teen groups to produce up-to-date, research-based curriculum. The Women's Fund serves more than 12,000 girls annually.

Service to Veterans Award (Individual): Brandy Baxter (*Dallas-Fort Worth*)

Air Force veteran Brandy Baxter has collaborated with nearly every veterans organization in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to increase awareness about the unique needs of women veterans. She uses her professional experience in personal finance to host webinars and workshops for women veterans who may need assistance in managing their household income, and she has been a voice for women veterans as a frequent speaker on panels, podcasts, and advocacy and training events. Through her work with At Ease Texas, a non-profit for women veterans, by women veterans, Brandy was instrumental in bringing the Women Veteran Network program to Dallas and has created many networking opportunities for women veterans who want to connect with each other.

Service to Veterans Award (Organization): Carry The Load (*Northeast Texas*)

What started in 2011 as an event with the mission to restore the true meaning of Memorial Day, has grown into a nationally recognized nonprofit organization that provides active ways to connect Americans to the sacrifices made by our military, veterans, first responders and their families. As Carry The Load celebrates its 10-year anniversary in 2021, its awareness program, which began as a 20-hour walk in Dallas, has grown into a national movement featuring a national relay which travels through 45 states, 70+ city rallies throughout the month of May and culminates in Dallas over Memorial Day

weekend. Volunteers participate year-round by cleaning headstones at the National Cemeteries, attending Patriot Day and Veterans Day events, and helping educate the next generation through the Carry The Flag education program.

Higher Education Community Impact Award: Rebuild Texas Carpentry Skills Training Program at Del Mar College Continuing Education *(Coastal Bend)*

Three years after enduring the devastation of Hurricane Harvey, Del Mar College remains invested in the long-term recovery of Texas with its innovative Rebuild Texas Carpentry Skills Training Program, which launched the summer of 2019. This unique 10-week program was created to address the Coastal Bend region's immense housing loss and growing unemployment numbers with a practical and versatile solution rooted in community service. The coursework combines traditional classroom instruction with hands-on experience in construction and carpentry: participants engage in a service learning project using the essential skills they learn to build a tiny home that is donated to a local school or church.

Corporate Community Impact Award: Texas Mutual *(Central Texas & Statewide)*

On a mission to build a stronger, safer Texas, Texas Mutual has a culture of service spurred by team members who are dedicated to making our state a better place to live and work. In 2019, 473 Texas Mutual employees volunteered an impressive 5,300 hours for 103 nonprofit organizations across the state. The depth of Texas Mutual's engagement can be seen in their longstanding partnership with the Central Texas Food Bank. In addition to providing nearly 550 hours of volunteer support to the organization, they also used their business expertise to revamp pantry distribution logistics and operations to better serve families in need.

Community Leadership Award (Individual): Blake Jennings *(College Station)*

Pastor Blake Jennings noticed a need in 2015 when multiple single mothers in his College Station congregation came to him with vehicle problems. Blake and his wife Julie created a nonprofit called OnRamp that provides reliable transportation to people in need, setting them on the path to self-sufficiency and enabling them to care better for their families. OnRamp's impact has been substantial, donating 51 vehicles to date, and repairing approximately 30 more. OnRamp actively engages volunteers in both vehicle repair and client care and partners with more than two dozen local businesses and charitable organizations.

Community Leadership Award (Organization): Crime Stoppers of Houston *(Houston)*

Crime Stoppers of Houston is leading Texas and the U.S. with innovative crime prevention programming to keep our communities safe. Established in the early 1980's as solely a Tip Line Program, Crime Stoppers remains committed to its mission to solve and prevent all crimes and now offers a robust public safety program that is reaching millions each year through its Safe School Institute, Safe Community Program, and victim services and advocacy programs. In 2019, Crime Stoppers reached more than 5.2 million community members, educated over 1.2 million students, and provided crisis services and support to nearly 250 victims and survivors. Through the power of volunteers, they also led the State to pass three legislative bills to enhance victim's rights and public safety and reached over 850

victims through peer support, legal advocacy, parole board hearings, support group meetings, and annual events.

Community Leadership Award (Network): AmeriCorps Central Texas (*Central Texas*)

AmeriCorps Central Texas (formerly ServeAustin Collaborative) is a collaboration of nine organizations that offer a wide range of opportunities to create a better future for everyone in Central Texas through paid AmeriCorps service. Together, the organizations engage 500+ AmeriCorps members annually in providing direct services to youth and adults living in low-income communities across the region.

Because completing a service year can be a life-changing experience that builds skills, expands networks, and creates pathways to higher education and employment, ACT is working to build a more local, more diverse service corps whose members will shape their own futures while strengthening their local community.

National Service “Make a Difference” Award: Samantha Mariel Sandoval Hernández (*Manor*)

Samantha Mariel Sandoval Hernández has served as an advisor to Manor New Technology High School juniors and seniors for the past two years as an AmeriCorps member with College Forward, which pairs recent college graduates with students to empower them to achieve their post-secondary goals. During the 2019 school year, she served a caseload of 16 seniors and 17 juniors in the College Forward program. All 16 seniors completed the FAFSA or TASFA compared to a national average of 60%. In addition to managing her required caseload, Coach Sam provided individualized support and guidance to many additional New Tech students—100% of graduating seniors and 75% of juniors—introducing them to the college application process and discussing post-secondary plans.

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