

## **Pro Bono: How Working Toward the Greater Good Can Make a Positive Impact on Your Practice**

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The successful incorporation of pro bono projects into one's legal practice is the cornerstone of a complete and well-balanced career. The Model Rules of Professional Responsibility require every lawyer to provide legal services for those who are "unable to pay," and encourage lawyers to complete "at least" 50 hours of pro bono legal services yearly. Model R. of Prof. Resp. 6.1. While this commitment may seem daunting, the spirit behind this rule is clear: as attorneys, we owe a responsibility to the public to serve those in need of our specialized knowledge and skills. Lawyers are bestowed the privilege of fulfilling a unique role in society as guardians of justice from the moment they are sworn in, and performing pro bono services is a crucial step toward accepting this role.

Pro bono work is typically easy to find, and is commonly advertised on the websites of state and local bar associations, legal aid and defenders' organizations. Opportunities are also posted on the ABA website under the "Center for Pro Bono" and are commonly offered on law school clinic websites. Before accepting a pro bono case, an attorney must first evaluate the time commitment he is willing to make. Short projects including will-drafting clinics (i.e. Wills for Heroes) and Ask-A-Lawyer Day telethons usually only require a few hours on a weekend, while some landlord-tenant and guardian ad litem matters may require months of litigation. If you are undertaking your inaugural pro bono case, it may be prudent to start out with a smaller project to "test the waters" before taking a case that requires deeper lawyer involvement.

The next factor to consider when taking a pro bono case is the skill level required. It is important that an attorney take only the cases in which he may ethically provide competent representation. To broaden the ranks of those who are eligible to participate, many pro bono centers host training sessions for attorneys who wish to volunteer in cases outside of their practice area. Many of the training sessions require a full day's commitment, but some offer the bonus of continuing legal education credit. Attorneys who seek to assist in a pro bono matter not within their field of law should consider taking on co-counsel specializing in that practice area to ensure that the case is handled in an idoneous manner. This cross-disciplinary component of pro bono work is appealing for many attorneys, as it allows for variation in their practice. In today's age of specialization, branching out of one's legal niche can be a welcome change of pace. Learning a new set of skills or field of law can lend diversification to your practice and enhance your legal awareness.

For new lawyers, participating in a pro bono project affords the rare opportunity of taking the lead in a case, a perquisite typically afforded to more experienced attorneys. Taking a file from start to finish hones crucial case management skills that can only be acquired from practice. Through pro bono work, new lawyers gain experiential training in dealing with: 1) time budgeting concerns, 2) developing legal strategy, 3) ethical

issues, 4) setting and meeting client expectations, and 5) working with opposing counsel and judges, to name a few. Pro bono cases also offer new attorneys greater exposure in working with clients, placing them in a favorable position for developing essential interviewing and communication skills. Pro bono projects sharpen talent and help build the confidence that comes with experience.

The business advantages to pro bono work are just as significant as its practical benefits. An attorney who regularly incorporates pro bono into his practice builds a positive reputation for himself in the community by demonstrating a commitment to promoting the welfare of others. An attorney also develops an entirely new set of contacts through pro bono projects, working closely with pro bono center employees, clients and their families, other attorneys, and judges, to name a few. An attorney's pro bono network can be an excellent source of referrals, potential business projects, and career opportunities.

It is all too often in the legal profession that attorneys lose sight of the rewards of pro bono work, their vision clouded by the pressing reality of billable hours and demanding case loads. Yet those who shy away from pro bono opportunities never realize the multitude of benefits they confer. Pro bono work can enliven a law practice by sprinkling variety into an attorney's typical caseload. Workload diversification lends novelty and intrigue to lawyers' professional lives, reminding them of what they love about their career in the law. A commitment to pro bono allows attorneys to take pleasure in their work while providing vital assistance to their communities. Attorneys who dedicate their efforts to serving society by taking pro bono cases enjoy a fulfilling career and professional satisfaction.