

## How to Get Started with Pro Bono Service

**RULE 6.1 OF THE MODEL RULES** of Professional Conduct states that lawyers have a professional responsibility to complete at least 50 hours of pro bono work annually. This service to the public—typically representation of people of limited means either directly or through a charitable organization—is not mandated in California. But it is strongly encouraged, and for good reason.

In 2012, the Legal Services Corporation, the congressional agency that provides financial grants to nonprofit legal aid programs to deliver civil legal assistance to low-income Americans, cut its funding by over \$50 million. In the same year, legal aid programs received significantly less funding from other sources as well. Nevertheless, these dedicated groups continue to provide services to the growing number of unemployed and low-income individuals who seek assistance.

People who do not or cannot receive pro bono help must fend for themselves. They must navigate the complicated legal system, and they often must do so despite mental, physical, and language limitations. As a result, they often do not have the access to justice that is promised to them in our Constitution.

The good news is that there are many opportunities for young lawyers to provide legal assistance to clients in the community. The benefit of these opportunities goes not just to the client in need but also the lawyer. In addition to the good feelings that come from doing justice-oriented work, young lawyers can increase their networking opportunities and gain practical legal experience.

### A Few Considerations

There are a variety of considerations and logistics in taking on your first pro bono case. First, what are your organization's practices relating to pro bono work? To really understand the firm's culture regarding pro bono work, it is worth reaching out to a more senior colleague to get insight into how pro bono work is viewed internally. One important thing to know is whether the hours will be counted as billable and if there is a number or a percentage cap.

Second, what are your professional goals in taking on a pro bono case? Are you open to gaining any experience as long as it gets you exposure to parts of the litigation process? Or do you want to get specific experience in a practice area that is related to your current caseload? Is there a partner with whom you would like to work more closely and who does a lot of work in a certain area?

Third, who should you go to in order to secure a pro bono opportunity? Many large firms have a pro bono coordinator or committee. If your firm does, you should go through the pro bono contact to start your search for a case. The pro bono person should have a list of projects pending or may help you set up a project in a field of your choice. If your firm does not have a pro bono person, you could reach out to the pro bono directors of legal aid and nonprofit organizations,

who can help you put your skills to work at their organizations.

Whether it is a firm or another organization that helps set up the pro bono work, the process generally involves a series of stages and items to investigate before taking on a case. Some but not all pro bono cases require limited legal knowledge in a subject area. Find out what and how much you will need to know before taking on a case, as well as the time commitment involved. Some organizations will offer free CLE trainings to get you started. Other opportunities, such as legal clinics, require limited knowledge and time commitment—for example, an afternoon or evening of limited-scope representation that

**These partnerships provide mentorship and technical support.**

**Often, these arrangements can be flexible, allowing young lawyers to be the first chair or cocounsel on a case.**

could be as brief as writing a demand letter.

Many nonprofit organizations partner with firms to prescreen cases and provide support for lawyers taking on pro bono cases. These partnerships provide mentorship and substantive and technical support for the pro bono attorney. Often, these arrangements can be flexible, allowing young lawyers to be the first chair or cocounsel on a case, depending on preference and experience.

The financial cost of taking on a pro bono case from a nonprofit is usually minimal. Most clients are of low income and will qualify for a court fee waiver under Government Code Sections 68630-68640 and Rule 3.51 of the California Rules of Court. Also, transcript or deposition costs can be waived on behalf of indigent litigants through the Transcript Reimbursement Fund. (See Business and Professions Code Sections 8030.2.-8030.8.) Finally, if you are still hesitant about taking on a pro bono case, most nonprofits have malpractice insurance that will act as the primary insurer to cover volunteer attorneys who take on cases for that organization.

We hope all young lawyers will look into taking on a pro bono case. Many who do so often develop the passion to continue to provide pro bono assistance. By highlighting the need for pro bono legal services, we hope to make pro bono a part of a young lawyer's legal practice so that as a legal community, we all may help bridge the justice gap and give everyone a chance to access justice. ■

**Laura Riley is a staff attorney at the Cancer Legal Resource Center, a joint program of the Disability Rights Legal Center and Loyola Law School. Phong Wong is the pro bono director at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. They are the cochairs of the LACBA Barristers Pro Bono Committee.**