

Certified Local Grown

Pro Bono Work That Supports Your Community

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You have become more conscientious about supporting your local community. You may shop at the weekend farmers' market instead of chain grocery stores, buy from local businesses, forgo the ease and savings at the big box stores, or eat at a restaurant that serves locally sourced food. You are part of the group of people making an impact. Now what if you applied this same philosophy to your pro bono work?

It is easy to feel intimidated by pro bono work. Big law firms highlight thousands of pro bono hours and extensive resources spent on natural disasters, emergency situations, and other large-scale pro bono projects. They can pump serious resources into addressing imminent catastrophes unfolding all over the world. It is flashy, important work worth highlighting because those attorneys are truly helping people when they need it the most—when they are in a crisis. There is no universal pro bono program model, however, that can or will be effective for all attorneys or law firms. For most attorneys, the best way to make an impact through pro bono work is simple: look to the local needs of your community.

Attorneys will not have to look far in their communities to find people in a state of personal crisis: the victim of domestic violence who is afraid to appear alone for a hearing, the elderly woman going through a late-in-life divorce, the child stuck in the middle of a contentious custody dispute, the tenant being wrongfully evicted from an already subpar rental, the incapacitated person in need of a legal guardian, and the veteran fighting to keep his benefits. Looking locally can be as easy as doing one thing this year: change *one* life in your community through pro bono work. This is as simple as assisting with an order of protection hearing or taking on a dissolution of marriage.

As a pro bono associate at Crowley Fleck PLLP in Montana, I witness firm attorneys reaching out of their comfort zones and making a difference in people's lives daily. One of our attorneys took

on the primary role in what appeared to be a simple pro bono dissolution. It was anything but a typical case. The client was a young woman in an abusive relationship who was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer. As her home life deteriorated, she thought her only choices were to stay or risk losing the health insurance she received through her husband. Her attorney was able to secure a favorable dissolution that removed her from an abusive situation, kept her insured, and reunited her with her beloved dogs for the remainder of her life. Her attorney's legal experience before this: transactional. Even outside of her typical practice area, she was able to make a meaningful impact through pro bono work.

One of the most important dimensions of the right to equal treatment under the law is the right to equal access to an attorney. Amid a national crisis in civil legal services to low-income individuals, it is essential that you integrate pro bono representation into the philosophy and culture of your legal practice. Look to your community resources to see where there are unmet needs. There are people in your community who will open the door for you to get involved. Contact your local legal services association for a referral, identify pro bono programs through the courts, participate in advice clinics, and reach out to your favorite nonprofit organization. These local organizations will endure past the headline of the moment, but they need attorneys willing to lend a hand and get the work done.

The measure of your pro bono success will not come down to number of hours or dollars spent during a pro bono assignment. Look to the real human implications to measure the quality of your own pro bono commitment. Start to fulfill your duty by helping just one person. You may not make the news, but you could change a life.

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