

## PRO BONO

Like giving blood or buying Girl Scout Cookies, most lawyers know that it is a “good thing” to volunteer one’s time for pro bono legal work. To many, it might be less clear why an entire firm should commit to a pro bono program, much less elevate it alongside business development and billable hour quotas. But law firms all over Texas are doing just that. If done well and with intention, law firm pro bono programs are not just a good thing but a great thing, with benefits for the firm and the city at large in addition to the pro bono clients. From our experience with law firm pro bono programs in Tarrant County, we have discovered some things that make these efforts worthwhile. Here are some tips on how to make yours a success.

### THREE REASONS WHY LAW FIRMS SHOULD CARE

*It is good for our neighbors.* Almost every person will need legal services at least once in his or her life. But the demand far exceeds the affordable supply of representation. According to the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, more than 4.8 million Texans live below the federal poverty level and more than 5.8 million qualify for legal aid. Pro bono lawyers help single mothers ensure that their children’s fathers are ordered to pay child support. They help senior citizens ensure that their loved ones are not left in the dark about their wishes for end-of-life care or their personal possessions. They help veterans secure Veterans Affairs benefits. And they help the homeless know where to go for help with Social Security and other services. The need is great.

*It is good for the city.* Your firm’s pro bono service plays an important part in the overall prosperity of your city, filling a critical role for a particularly vulnerable segment of the population. Just as there is a societal economic cost to poverty, pro bono legal services provide an economic benefit. The Perryman Group reported in 2013 that for every direct dollar



# For the Good of Your City

HOW LAW FIRM PRO BONO CAN IMPACT CLIENTS AND THE COMMUNITY.

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pro bono matters together, as an alternative to treating the client to dinner or a ball game.

Not only will a pro bono program improve your standing with prospective clients, but it can also improve recruiting for top talent. Today’s gifted young lawyers are looking for more than just a paycheck. They also want to know that their work will make a real difference in the community. A robust pro bono program can give a firm the edge when it comes to wooing first-rate talent. One way to establish pro bono as part of your firm’s culture is to incorporate a pro bono project into your recruiting or summer clerkship program.

Finally, pro bono involvement provides a natural way to train new attorneys in practical and substantive legal skills. Legal clinics and pro bono representation offer a chance to

spent in Texas on indigent civil legal services, the overall economy experiences a \$7.48 gain in total spending.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to see why: When a single mom receives child support needed to feed and clothe her kids, helping to keep those children in school and off the streets, the life of the city improves. When veterans get access to the right resources for themselves and their families, the life of the city improves. When families have access to landlord-tenant services and can avoid the downward spiral of homelessness, the life of the city improves. Law firms are uniquely positioned to leverage their pooled talent to have a significant, positive impact on the welfare of the cities they serve.

*It is good for business.* Corporate clients are increasingly looking for more than just a good rate from their professional service providers; they also want law firms that are committed to community service and improvement. There is no better way to show your firm’s dedication than with a solid, engaged pro bono program. Some firms are even teaming up with their clients’ in-house legal departments to take on

communicate with clients or see a courtroom when the opportunity may not otherwise be available. Exposing associate attorneys to a variety of legal issues and clients benefits the law firms that depend on their talent and experience.

### THREE KEYS TO SUCCESS

*Partner up.* One obstacle to a successful pro bono program is in matching the lawyer to the need. For example, the largest legal need among the poor is in the area of family law. But chances are that unless you are a family law firm, most of the lawyers in your firm have never even cracked the Family Code. That is where good partners come in.

In Fort Worth, the Tarrant County Volunteer Attorney Services program hosts several family law clinics a year where lawyers receive two free CLE hours in family law basics before being assigned a client with an uncomplicated family law issue. Experienced family law attorneys also volunteer as mentors and are available to lend a hand from start to finish. Law firms are invited to partner with TVAS to staff the clinics, offering the firms easy access to clients along with the training and support needed to serve them effectively and competently, no matter the lawyer's normal practice area. TVAS has similar programs in areas of estate planning and guardianships. We suggest that you contact your local bar association to see if there are similar initiatives offered in your county.

Law firms also partner with the Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans-Tarrant County Chapter to advise veterans on common legal questions and, if appropriate, to take on cases or make referrals for additional pro bono representation. To find a TLTV clinic near you, go to [texasbar.com/veterans](http://texasbar.com/veterans).

Whether it is TVAS, TLTV, Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, Houston Volunteer Lawyers, the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid throughout Southwest Texas, or the Equal Justice Center in San Antonio, Austin, or the Metroplex, there is a nonprofit legal agency in your area that can help you create a successful pro bono program.

*Reward volunteers.* The American Bar Association reports that lack of time, commitment to family obligations, and lack of skills or experience in the needed practice areas are the top three factors that surveyed attorneys said most discouraged them from providing pro bono services.<sup>2</sup> As an employer, a law firm is uniquely positioned to reduce the personal and financial cost of helping a person in need. Successful pro bono programs give attorneys billable-hours credit for time spent on pro bono matters taken on through the firm's pro bono program. They also give favorable consideration to pro bono work when evaluating attorneys for firm advancement. Some firms set goals for pro bono service and provide annual recognition to lawyers who meet the goal. While doing good should be its own reward, a law firm can mitigate the corresponding personal and financial costs. Consider giving awards and mentioning volunteers in publications—both internal and external.

*Start at the top.* The best way to see your firm's pro bono program flourish is to make it part of the firm's culture. And the best way to do so is to get everyone involved. If the only lawyers at your pro bono clinic are associates who have a pro bono quota to fill, enthusiasm for your program will wither. Instead, encourage firm leadership, section chairs, and rain-makers to give time to pro bono. Feature their participation prominently in firmwide communications. Encourage them to involve associates in their matters. When everyone from senior partners to summer clerks participates in pro bono, volunteerism will become a part of your firm's identity. In some circumstances, free CLE is available to both a mentor and a mentee for their work together on a pro bono matter.<sup>3</sup> The firm benefits from fostering an environment for pro bono, connecting lawyers from different generations, energizing the senior attorneys, and saving on continuing education costs.

### CONCLUSION

Law firms are uniquely positioned to contribute to the life and well-being of their communities through coordinated, well-organized pro bono programs. Enthusiasm for helping others partnered with the right tools and incentives can ensure that volunteering becomes a part of your firm's DNA, benefiting not only the individual clients served but also your firm and, in the end, the overall welfare of the city where you live. **TBJ**

### NOTES

1. The Perryman Group, *Current and Potential Economic Benefits of Legal Aid Services in Texas: 2013 Update* (Feb. 2013), available at <http://www.teajf.org/news/docs/Impact-of-Legal-Aid-2013-FINAL.pdf>.
2. American Bar Association Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service, *Supporting Justice III: A Report on the Pro Bono Work of America's Lawyers* (Mar. 2013), available at [http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/probono\\_public\\_service/ls\\_pb\\_Supporting\\_Justice\\_III\\_final.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/probono_public_service/ls_pb_Supporting_Justice_III_final.authcheckdam.pdf).
3. Pro Bono Mentor Program, State Bar of Texas, <https://www.texasbar.com/Content/NavigationMenu/LawyersGivingBack/LegalAccessDivision/MentorProgram.htm>.



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