

## **Creating a Win-Win Situation:**

### **New J.D.s Need to Gain Experience, Pro Bono Clinics Need Volunteers**

By: Lloyd Freeman

The economy may be down, but some opportunities are looking up.

In today's tough economy, the number of people seeking pro bono legal assistance is higher than ever. A vast number of people simply cannot afford to hire a lawyer to handle their routine legal problems. More tenants are being evicted, debtors are filing bankruptcy and indigent citizens are in need of professional tax assistance. Unfortunately, the lack of disposable income in this recession prevents many of the people listed above from being able to hire adequate counsel. Many of these people will turn to pro bono legal clinics to help them during these trying times. However, pro bono services have always been a finite resource, and the organizations and agencies that offer them are currently in need of more volunteers.

Meanwhile, law firms are hiring less and in some instances, deferring start dates for their incoming associate classes. It is harder than ever for law students and young attorneys to find jobs, and it is unclear when the tide will change.

Pro bono volunteerism is exactly the cure to both economic woes.

Law students and young attorneys who may not have been offered full-time or summer associate positions should seize the opportunity to volunteer with a pro bono clinic or agency. There are countless benefits to performing pro bono work. To begin, it is an excellent way to gain valuable lawyering experience that you would otherwise not be able to obtain until much later in your career.

Many attorneys have made their first court appearances, interviewed their first clients and filed their first pleadings in pro bono cases. Other attorneys will likely wait years to independently work on such meaningful matters. Further, your involvement with a public service group or nonprofit agency will certainly fill any gaps on your resume while allowing you to perform a much-needed community service. It ends up to be a win-win situation for everyone involved. Your volunteerism will truly be the greatest way to make the best out of a bad situation.

Law students, though, should start volunteering now, through their schools' pro bono programs. All of the law schools in the Philadelphia area (University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Villanova University, Drexel University and Rutgers-Camden) offer a full range of clinics that are sure to appeal to students' interests while offering assistance to members of the local community.

For example, a recent study shows that in 2009, bankruptcy filings increased by 32 percent more than in previous years. To combat this, Rutgers Law School-Camden, in conjunction with the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the District of New Jersey, the local bankruptcy bar and South Jersey Legal Services, offers the Bankruptcy Pro Bono Project. Through this program, 2L and 3L

students are able to assist in representing persons in need of filing Chapter 7 bankruptcy. This experience presents the opportunity to develop an amazing skill set that will make law students more sought-after candidates to many law firms recruiting bankruptcy attorneys — which are still a hot commodity in a down economy.

Additionally, it is a chance for law students to meet several judges and attorneys working in the program, which will build their network. These professionals could serve as references as students later apply for full time positions. Even better, these contacts could use their own personal connections to find employment for new graduates. These are just a few advantages available from one of the many pro bono programs offered by an area law school.

Volunteerism can also help law students in meeting their graduation requirements. Several law schools now require students to complete pro bono service hours before graduation. The University of Pennsylvania has led the way for other schools nationwide in mandating student pro bono work. The law school requires 70 hours of public service law-related work from each of its students. With its long list of pro bono offerings and the flexibility to allow students to create their own pro bono initiatives, there is ample opportunity for students to become involved. Pro bono volunteerism is also beneficial to young attorneys already placed in permanent positions. Many of the pro bono programs at the area law schools require attorney volunteers to oversee the students or train them in a particular area. The more attorneys that volunteer to help, the more students can be trained and the community can benefit even more.

Pro bono work also accelerates professional development for employed attorneys by offering client contact and managing your own cases. You can use these skills to help you in your practice so that you are more comfortable when you are faced with the same challenges at your firm.

As a young attorney, if your job start date has been deferred as a result of the poor economic climate, you should certainly consider volunteering to perform pro bono work. In such a competitive market, the worst thing you could do is create an inexplicable break in your work history, so it's better to fill that break by volunteering legal service. Find a pro bono program about which you are passionate and spend a few hours a week there. Your firm leadership will very much appreciate your willingness to expand your knowledge of the legal system while waiting to begin your job. They will also admire your commitment to giving back to your community. In fact, several law firms have begun to encourage and compensate their attorneys with deferred start dates to volunteer with a pro bono or nonprofit agency.

Believe it or not, pro bono work can also lead to client development. Offering a few hours of legal assistance to a small start-up company or nonprofit today could pay off later. If the small company weathers the storm and makes it through the recession, it could later become a larger company in need of representation at some point. Hopefully, when that time comes, the company will remember you and call upon you to act as hired counsel. Along the same lines, the entrepreneur you helped may refer you to other entrepreneurs and lead to a profitable book of business for you.

Above all, you will gain the satisfaction of knowing that you've contributed to your community. There is a terrible stigma associated with lawyers, especially those at large firms, that they are out of reach to the average person and not in touch with the needs of our community. Now more than ever, people need to know that there are attorneys and law students who are willing and able to offer their legal services on a pro bono basis.

The American Bar Association continues to strongly recommend pro bono work as a professional responsibility for every attorney. Attorneys of all ages should fulfill that obligation and take advantage of opportunities to volunteer and make an impact in their communities.

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