



By Patrick A. Talley, Jr.

The Gift of Justice: Giving Back Through Pro Bono

During this month when we celebrate pro bono service in our state, I want to reflect briefly on how we can harness the spirit of giving to those most vulnerable in Louisiana. As we all know, poverty is rampant in our state. With nearly 20% of the population — approximately 880,000 people — living below the federal poverty guidelines, the challenges they face go far beyond meeting basic living expenses.¹ When legal issues arise, many of these individuals simply cannot afford the market rates for an attorney, leaving them without the help they so desperately need.

To make matters worse, many parts of Louisiana are considered civil legal deserts — areas where the nearest civil legal resource, such as a legal aid attorney, a self-help desk or a law library, is more than a 45-minute drive away.² For those living in these areas, the barriers to obtaining legal help are even more severe, compounding the difficulties of poverty. Without accessible legal guidance, vulnerable individuals are often left to navigate complex legal challenges on their own. It's in these moments that we, as members of the legal profession, have the opportunity — and the **responsibility** — to step in and fill the gap through pro bono work.

At this time of year, when generosity and community are at the forefront of our minds, it is especially important to remember our ethical duty as lawyers to ensure fairness in the courts. We hold a special power that allows us to serve as stewards of justice and, by offering our skills and time to those in need, we can make a real difference. By using our skills to serve those in need, we can ensure that justice isn't just a privilege for a

few, but a right for all, regardless of their financial situation.

To demonstrate this commitment to pro bono, the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) is a proud partner in the Lawyers in Libraries program. For the past decade, this program has partnered with public libraries across the state to offer free legal services during the American Bar Association's National Celebrate Pro Bono Week, also declared as "Pro Bono Week" in Louisiana by Gov. Jeff Landry. Each year, hundreds of attorney volunteers host legal presentations and Ask-A-Lawyer events to provide guidance and support to those who need it most. This year alone, more than 152 attorneys volunteered for Lawyers in Libraries, offering their time and talent to assist individuals at 135 events statewide.

The impact of this initiative has not gone unnoticed. In 2024, the LSBA and the Law Library of Louisiana were honored with the Excellence in Community Engagement Award from the American Association for Law Libraries. This recognition highlights the decade-long commitment our members have shown to serving those in need through programs like Lawyers in Libraries. But our dedication to pro bono work shouldn't be limited to one week a year — it should be a year-round commitment to supporting Louisiana's most vulnerable populations.

With the new year upon us, I want to double down on this commitment to pro bono and further encourage participation in the "LSBA's 25 in 2025" campaign. The LSBA is launching this initiative to challenge all Louisiana attorneys to provide 25 hours of pro bono service in the year 2025. This goal represented just half of the aspirational standard provided in Rule 6.1, but even a modest contribution

of 25 hours can make a profound difference in the life of someone facing a legal issue. There are countless ways to get involved and so many wonderful pro bono organizations that can help you achieve this goal of doing 25 hours of pro bono in 2025.

Some of you may be thinking, "I just don't have the time to take on pro bono work." That's a fair concern. But what if I told you that there's a way to contribute without ever leaving your office? With the ABA-sponsored LA.FreeLegalAnswers.org program, you can offer legal assistance entirely online. Low-income individuals post civil legal questions, and you choose which ones to answer — on your own schedule and from the comfort of your own desk. It's a flexible, convenient way to hit that 25-hour goal without stepping away from your daily responsibilities.

For this coming year, I encourage each of you to consider how you can give the gift of justice through pro bono work. Whether it's participating in Lawyers in Libraries, answering questions online, or volunteering with a local legal aid or pro bono organization, every hour counts. Together, we can ensure that access to justice is not just an ideal but a reality for all Louisianans.

FOOTNOTES

1. United States Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/profile/Louisiana?g=040XX00US22>.

2. Civil Legal Deserts can be better understood by analogizing them to "grocery deserts," where grocery stores are not accessible and the community has to turn to fast food and convenience stores for food.

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