



By Shayna L. Sonnier

Thinking about Fall and Celebrations of Pro Bono Work

As summer, ever so slowly, turns to Fall, I look forward to football season, spiced lattes, a new selection of scented candles . . . and begin to reflect on the passing year. It is often a time to assess what I've done, what I hope to do and the things for which I am thankful. The October celebrations of pro bono work always help me with this task and remind me of the special nature and special obligations of our profession.

Rule 6.1 of the Louisiana Rules of Professional Conduct states that, "[e]very lawyer should aspire to provide legal services to those unable to pay."¹ It sets up the aspirational goal of every attorney providing 50 hours of pro bono work each year. But, providing pro bono is more than just fulfilling an obligation; it is about helping our community in need. There is an overwhelming and almost daunting need for pro bono work in Louisiana. Louisiana has the second highest rate of poverty in the nation, with almost 18% of the state's families living in poverty.² Legal issues only compound poverty by causing additional harm and heartbreak for families. When you provide pro bono work, you are not just giving your services for free; you are helping a victim of domestic violence find safety, ensuring an elderly couple stay in their home, helping a veteran access much deserved services, and ensuring hurricane survivors are granted funds to rebuild their homes.

Pro bono work does not just make you feel good. There is an economic benefit to the state when vulnerable people are given access to much needed legal services. For every \$1 invested in Louisiana's civil legal aid services, these programs deliver \$17.99 in imme-



diately and long-term financial benefits.³ Again, providing pro bono work is more than fulfilling an obligation; it provides tangible and long-term benefits to the recipients of the legal services and our communities.

This is why I volunteer and encourage you to volunteer your legal services to those in need. Remember, as lawyers we possess a special skill that others do not — we can navigate complex and challenging legal issues and the court system. Join me and the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) in participating in this year's National Celebrate Pro Bono Week Oct. 23-28. During this week, programs across the state organize volunteer events and programming to recognize the need for pro bono services and the volunteers who provide it. Some organizations even celebrate the entire month! No matter when and how you recognize the need for pro bono, there are numerous programs located throughout the state and numerous statewide opportunities to which you can donate your time. Whatever your experience or skills or however much time you have to volunteer, there is a

pro bono opportunity out there for you. The LSBA staff is happy to provide a local contact for your efforts. Some of the ongoing needs throughout the state are included in the following list.

Pro Bono Opportunities

- ▶ Ask-a-Lawyer Clinic, Baton Rouge Bar Foundation Pro Bono Project
- ▶ Ask-a-Lawyer Clinic, Shreveport Bar Foundation Pro Bono Project
- ▶ Divorce Workshops, The Pro Bono Project of New Orleans
- ▶ In Forma Pauperis Notarization Clinics, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services
- ▶ Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (statewide)
- ▶ Reentry Legal Clinic, Justice & Accountability Center of Louisiana
- ▶ Research Project, Louisiana Appleseed
- ▶ Security Deposit Clinic, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services
- ▶ Self-Help Resource Center, Baton Rouge Bar Association
- ▶ Virtual Self-Help Resource Center, The Pro Bono Project of New Orleans

In addition, the LSBA offers several statewide opportunities to volunteer. Two of note are the annual Lawyers in Libraries events and LA.FreeLegalAnswers.org.

Lawyers in Libraries is a yearly event and part of the LSBA's efforts during National Celebrate Pro Bono Week where we work with the state's public libraries in setting up either in-person or virtual ask-a-lawyer events. In addition to the ask-a-lawyer events, the LSBA's Access to Justice Department provides programming for the public via Facebook Live on relevant legal issues. Our goal is to have at least one event in every parish of the state.

The second volunteer opportunity through the LSBA is answering civil legal questions online through LA.FreeLegalAnswers.org. LA.FreeLegalAnswers.org is an online pro bono program created and maintained by the American Bar Association and administered locally by the LSBA. Both opportunities are a great way for

you to give back and provide both in-person and virtual pro bono opportunities.

Further, there are pro bono resources for those wanting to volunteer their time but may be unfamiliar with most needed areas of the law. These are some of the pro bono resources available:

► Pro Bono Net, www.probono.net/la, an online website filled with pro bono resources and trainings.

► Louisiana Legal Services & Pro Bono Desk Manual made possible by Loyola University New Orleans College of Law, <https://law.loyno.edu/centers/gillis-long-poverty-law-center/desk-manual>.

► Louisiana LawHelp, <https://louisianalawhelp.org/>, an online website that provides a plethora of plain language legal information.

Also, please read the President's Message from Deidre Deculus Robert, president of the Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF), on page 210 for additional ways to serve. The LBF is another wonderful organization to which you can volunteer your time as they

are the largest funder of civil legal aid in Louisiana. The LSBA and the LBF work closely together to ensure that the citizens of our great state who truly need the help have access to our legal system.

If you have questions about pro bono opportunities, contact Rachael Mills (rachael.mills@lsba.org) with the LSBA's Access to Justice Program.

FOOTNOTES

1. Louisiana Rules of Professional Conduct Rule 6.1.

2. World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/poverty-rate-by-state>.

3. The Economic Impact and Social Return on Investment of Civil Legal Aid Services for Louisiana (fiscal year 2021-2022), <https://raisingthebar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EIS-Full-Report-22-1.pdf>.

Shayna L. Lonnie

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