

ILLINOIS FORUM ON PRO BONO: THE FUTURE OF PRO BONO AND HOW YOU CAN HELP

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The Forum began with a panel presentation that explored poverty in Illinois and its connection to the need for legal assistance among low-income individuals and families, as well as ways in which increased pro bono legal services can help address those needs. Following the panel presentation, small discussions groups considered several questions that touched on the themes from the panel presentation in an effort to explore how to further expand and enhance pro bono across the circuit. While more detailed notes from those discussions are below, some highlights included: a proposal to develop a court-based pro bono program for low-income self-represented litigants to give them access to a pro bono lawyer for immediate and discrete advice or assistance; a discussion about the potential of the judiciary to be a source of information about current pro bono needs and influential in increasing the number of pro bono volunteers; and a conversation about the importance of mentoring and shadowing programs between experienced attorneys and pro bono attorneys new to certain areas of law.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION NOTES

Below are the collective ideas and feedback as recorded by each roundtable discussion group.

I. What can be done to better recruit and support pro bono volunteers?

- Recognize current volunteers more widely to thank them and to encourage others to get involved;
- Increase education of local attorneys about the need for pro bono legal services, available opportunities, and upcoming trainings;
- Maintain regular contact with existing volunteers; and
- Target volunteer recruitment and pro bono trainings around specific areas of law, such as small claims or eviction defense.

II. What are the barriers to pro bono for individual attorneys?

- Fear of taking a case without adequate knowledge of the legal issues involved;
- Uncertainty about the amount of time the case will ultimately require;
- The conflicts that arise in rural communities with a limited number of attorneys;
- Concerns about being supported by firm management, in doing pro bono generally or in doing pro bono outside of usual practice areas;
- Unpredictable and inconsistent court dates and times; and
- The lack of pro bono resources geared towards volunteers outside of Chicago.

III. What are some of the pro bono challenges your law firm or corporation faces (as opposed to individuals)?

- The expense of attorney time and any fees associated with the firm attorney's involvement in the pro bono matter.

IV. What are some unique pro bono strategies that you have successfully used? What replicable models exist for successful and innovative pro bono programs/projects?

- Leverage law students participating in law school clinics to assist with specific pro bono projects;
- Provide concrete and written examples of ways to apply limited scoped representation for pro bono service;
- Make opportunities available for pro bono attorneys in training to shadow attorneys working in that area of law; and
- Develop a court-based pro bono program to help unrepresented low-income litigants who need immediate advice or assistance on a limited scope basis. Appropriate cases would include those concerning: small claims; evictions; Orders of Protection; and family law.

V. There is a wide range of potential volunteers within the legal community, e.g. government attorneys, senior attorneys, law students and paralegals, who are not the traditional pro bono volunteer. How do we effectively engage these groups in pro bono legal services? What partnership opportunities exist?

- Use experienced attorneys to mentor and train young lawyers in pro bono cases.

VI. What role could/do courts and judges have in supporting your program's efforts? Are there other individual or organizational advocates who are key to your success?

- Judges can maintain open communication with the legal community to provide a clear sense of the different unmet legal needs they see;
- Judges could identify ways to make the process easier for pro bono volunteers to appear in court by setting consistent times and dates for pro bono hearings, or calling pro bono cases first; and
- Courts could assist in pairing new pro bono attorneys to shadow experienced attorneys in court.

VII. How can we engage those attorneys who are not currently involved in pro bono?

- Establish a system of judicial appointments for pro bono matters; and
- Develop regular cross-county "Ask A Lawyer" days for volunteers to answer general legal questions, similar to what is sponsored annually by the Illinois State Bar Association.