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Pro bono needs to be a team effort

By Jo Anna Pollock

Jo Anna Pollock is an associate at Simmons, Hanly, Conroy LLC in Alton. She practices in the complex litigation department and represents individuals and small businesses in claims involving fraud, theft and contamination.

After returning from military service, James encountered years of hardship trying to land a job — even finding himself homeless for stretches of time.

He reached the point where he could earn gainful employment to support his young family. But a warrant in his record prevented him from landing the job.

When faced with that obstacle, James didn't know what to do.

Enter the local Veterans Court volunteer attorney, who made a few phone calls and learned the warrant was actually a case of mistaken identity. Once the warrant was dismissed, James could start his new job and provide for his family.

But what if there was no volunteer attorney to help him navigate a confusing system? Unfortunately, there are many more people like James in Illinois trying to handle their own legal affairs.

A 2005 study found that tens of thousands of people across the state were turned away each year from an overburdened and under-funded legal aid system. In 2003 alone, low-income households faced more than 1.3 million civil legal problems involving a variety of issues, including evictions, physical and financial abuse, domestic violence and child custody.

In more than 80 percent of those cases, the individuals and their families confronted the legal issues without legal assistance.

As Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice [Rita B. Garman](#) said, the need for pro bono lawyers continues today.

"I began my legal career in 1968 as a legal aid attorney in Danville, Ill. Thus, I have long been aware of the vast unmet need for legal services," she said. "Most of the individuals who need legal representation but cannot afford to hire an attorney are not merely poor — they are the elderly, the disabled, veterans and children.

“The legal services they need are not a luxury — they involve issues of housing, health care, abuse and neglect and domestic violence. While the past 40 years have seen the enactment of many laws protecting consumers, tenants, victims of domestic violence and others in need, obtaining the benefits of these laws and navigating the various bureaucracies to obtain benefits and services has become more and more complicated.

“Therefore, providing access to legal aid or pro bono legal services is not only admirable, it is a professional and societal obligation.”

However, providing pro bono services downstate can be more challenging due to geographic spread and the smaller pool of lawyers. Born out of limited resources available to serve such an overwhelming need, the Public Interest Law Initiative developed a model to coordinate, promote and encourage pro bono work at the judicial circuit level.

Combining the efforts of the bench, law firms, corporate attorneys and public interest lawyers at the local level, PILI has made significant strides toward the goal of identifying and providing legal services to the underserved by working with the judicial circuits throughout the state.

“PILI, in coordination with Prairie State Legal Services and Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation,” said [Michael G. Bergmann](#), PILI’s executive director, “have developed the Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committees in order to assess the specific local needs for pro bono services, to more fully engage local attorney in pro bono and to recognize those attorneys for their work.”

The coordination and delivery of pro bono legal services is not new to the 3rd Judicial Circuit, comprising Bond and Madison counties. The 3rd Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee was launched in 2011 under the leadership of 3rd Circuit Judge [Barbara Crowder](#).

That same year, the Legal Advice Conference Center, located on-site at the courthouse, was opened to provide advice and information to pro se litigants.

Through the years, the 3rd Circuit has delivered needed legal services to its residents in a variety of ways.

“We established the (committee) to coordinate local volunteer efforts and to brainstorm for ways to provide information and assistance to the growing number of people without lawyers,” Crowder said.

“As a group, we provide opportunities for high school students, free legal appointments for those of limited income without attorneys, pro bono mediators for family court and programs to assist veterans. The committee’s impact is already being felt in the community and we hope to increase participation and our services in the future.”

Raising awareness of the need for pro bono services and adding depth to the bench of lawyers willing to provide those services is a continuous goal. Across the state, several circuits are in various stages of implementing a pro bono pledge aimed at recruiting lawyers to commit to providing services.

For instance, the 10th Judicial Circuit (Marshall, Peoria, Putnam, Stark and Tazewell counties), chaired by Associate Judge [Lisa Y. Wilson](#), launched its Pro Bono Pledge Program last year.

Nearly 40 law firms and corporations have taken the pledge and stand ready to represent the underserved. Those participants will be recognized at an upcoming reception during Pro Bono Week 2014. Several other circuits — including the 3rd, 5th, 6th and 14th — are working on their own versions to adopt this year.

While the needs remain great, the collaboration and coordination of pro bono services across the state continues.

If you are interested in learning more about increasing pro bono services in your area, visit PILI at pili.org/pro-bono/judicial-circuit-committees.

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