

LAW STUDENT PRO BONO



What is “pro bono?”

“Pro bono” comes from the Latin “pro bono publico” and means “for the public good.” In the practice setting, pro bono generally refers to a lawyer providing legal services, without fee or expectation of a fee, to less fortunate members of our community. Often, pro bono work occurs in partnership with a legal aid or public interest law organization. Lawyers have a special responsibility to perform pro bono work because of their unique ability to ensure that everyone in our community – regardless of income – has meaningful access to the justice system. As a law student preparing to enter the legal profession, you share this important responsibility, and can undertake this critical work before you graduate.

It is our ethical obligation as attorneys in Illinois to provide pro bono assistance to persons in need of legal services that they cannot afford. According to the American Bar Association Model Rules of Professional Conduct, Rule 6.1, “Every lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay. A lawyer should aspire to render at least (50) hours of pro bono publico legal services per year.” Furthermore, the preamble to the Supreme Court of Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct provides, in pertinent part, reads as follows:

It is the responsibility of those licensed as officers of the court to use their training, experience and skills to provide services in the public interest for which compensation may not be available. An individual lawyer’s efforts in these areas is evidence of the lawyer’s good character and fitness to practice law.

In 2006, the Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission (ARDC) implemented a pro bono reporting requirement for attorneys licensed in Illinois. According to the Committee Comments to the amended Rule 756(f), the reporting requirement is intended to serve as an annual reminder to Illinois lawyers that pro bono legal service is an integral part of a lawyer’s professionalism.

What is the Public Interest Law Initiative?

Through its efforts, the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) cultivates a lifelong commitment to public interest law. At PILI, we believe that you enter the legal profession the moment you enroll in law school. And regardless of whether you ultimately choose to practice in a law firm, a corporation, a legal aid office, a unit of government, or in academia, you have a role to play in serving the public interest.

For law students, PILI strives to encourage pro bono participation as well as law student involvement in law school-based legal clinics. PILI also offers a paid public interest law Internship program during the summer and academic semesters. For new law school graduates, we offer a public interest law Fellowship program. Together, these programs help to instill this critical public interest/pro bono ethic early in an attorney’s career. To ensure that this public interest law ethic grows into a life-long participation in public interest law and pro bono work, PILI offers a pro bono program, the Pro Bono Initiative (PBI). Through PBI, we promote best practices for pro bono work, help ensure effective communication about available pro bono opportunities, and act as a clearinghouse and resource for pro bono issues.

To learn more about PILI, its Internship and Fellowship Programs and its Pro Bono Initiative, visit us at www.pili-law.org.

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How do you want to
Contribute?

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What types of pro bono work can law students do?

Law students can help provide much-needed assistance to legal aid and public interest law organizations that provide legal services to persons of limited means. Law students can choose from a range of pro bono opportunities that complement their interests and skills, including:

- *Interviewing clients at a local legal aid agency, hotline or clinic;*
- *Researching legal issues;*
- *Drafting legal motions, memoranda or briefs;*
- *Assisting in trial or administrative preparations;*
- *For students with a Rule 711 license, appearing in court or representing clients at administrative hearings under the supervision of a licensed attorney;*
- *Assisting with pro bono transactional legal assistance, which can include work in the areas of corporate, tax, intellectual property and real estate work, to low-income small business entrepreneurs or community-based nonprofit organizations involved with community economic development issues;*
- *Helping clients navigate the legal process at court-based self-help centers or advice desks, or at neighborhood clinics; and*
- *Making presentations and/or developing community legal education materials on legal issues of interest to persons of limited means.*

How do law students benefit from performing pro bono work?

In addition to helping to provide much needed legal assistance to persons of limited means, performing pro bono work exposes law students to many personal and professional benefits that ultimately will help them become better lawyers, including:

- *An opportunity to meet and assist a “real” client, often the only opportunity to do so while in law school;*
- *Development or enhancement of many legal practice skills, including interviewing, research, writing, trial preparation, case management and interpersonal skills;*
- *An opportunity to gain exposure to various areas of substantive law, which may help with the selection of a future practice specialty;*
- *Gaining professional experience, enhancing resumes and building relationships with practicing attorneys who may be important contacts for future employment;*
- *Emotional fulfillment which will help increase law students’ connection to the community, while making it a better place to live;*
- *The opportunity to learn firsthand about the unmet needs of the poor and working poor; and*
- *Learning to balance responsibilities and integrate pro bono work into their practice at the beginning of a law career.*

“Law student pro bono is an exceptional opportunity to cultivate a lifelong commitment to public interest law.

Throughout my career as a legal aid lawyer, a private practitioner, and now as a judge, I have seen firsthand outstanding volunteer work performed by law students and lawyers. Pro bono work in part helps to close an acute gap for clients who otherwise would receive no legal representation. Working under the tutelage of lawyer-mentors gives students invaluable, hands-on legal training beyond the walls of the law school classroom. In addition, law student volunteers receive the satisfaction of making real differences in clients’ lives. Resolving clients’ legal problems often creates positive ripples throughout their lives, leading to the resolution of related non-legal problems and significantly impacting their futures.”

Honorable Thomas L. Kilbride, Justice, Illinois Supreme Court



Why are pro bono legal services so important?

Legal aid is a critical social service that helps prevent minor legal issues from spiraling into crises. According to a major study, *The Legal Aid Safety Net: A Report on the Legal Needs of Low-Income Illinoisans* (available at www.ltf.org/docs/legalneeds.pdf), low-income Illinois residents succeed in obtaining help for only one out of every six problems they face which require the services of a lawyer. According to this study, poor people faced more than 1.3 million civil legal problems, involving issues such as domestic violence, divorce, child custody, evictions, mortgage foreclosures or the physical and financial abuse of the elderly. Unfortunately, Illinois' legal aid system remains severely under-funded today, leaving hundreds of thousands of lower-income residents unable to obtain civil legal assistance that is critical to their safety and independence. The equivalent of only about 325 full-time legal aid lawyers practice in Illinois; this is a ratio of one legal aid lawyer for every 4,752 problems faced by the poor. The rapidly growing gap between the legal needs of those who cannot afford legal services and the resources available to meet the needs must be bridged, and law students can and should play an integral role.

Now is the time to get involved in pro bono!

Now is the time to become involved in pro bono activities through your law school, a local bar association, or a local legal aid provider. You can make a difference by helping to provide critical legal services to those in need. In return, pro bono work will provide you with personal and professional fulfillment, which will help you become a better lawyer.

To get involved, you should visit your law school public interest law advisor or career services offices and regularly visit www.IllinoisProBono.org for all the latest pro bono resources and opportunities. In addition, the Young Lawyers Section of The Chicago Bar Association hosts an annual Pro Bono and Community Service Fair, of which PILI is a co-sponsor. This event is a perfect opportunity for law students to learn more about the many wonderful pro bono organizations in and around Chicago. Visit www.pili-law.org for additional details.

What resources are available to assist law students in their pro bono efforts?

Illinois Legal Aid Online has developed web-based resources for pro bono volunteers throughout Illinois. Through the website, www.IllinoisProBono.org, interested volunteers can find a listing of pro bono opportunities available at legal aid organizations throughout the state. Users can search based on a variety of factors, including location, type of opportunity, area of law, skills they would like to acquire, specific client type, and their time availability.

The website contains thousands of legal resources in 24 areas of law. The largest volume of practice support information is concentrated in the areas of greatest need for lower-income clients, including housing, family law, and consumer law. Website users can sort the legal resources library by practice area or by type of resource, so finding forms or video training presentations is easy.

Illinois Legal Aid Online works with every pro bono program in the state to provide volunteers with the highest quality and most up to date information and training resources. The website supports both pro bono attorneys and pro bono programs seeking volunteers.

Visit <http://lawstudents.illinoisprobono.org>, a special home page specifically designed for law students for additional information on law student pro bono.

Visit these sites today to learn more about law student pro bono:

Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI)
www.pili-law.org

Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO)
www.IllinoisProBono.org
<http://lawstudents.illinoisprobono.org>

The American Bar Association Center for Pro Bono
www.abaprobono.org
www.abanet.org/legalservices/downloads/probono/path.pdf
www.abanet.org/legalservices/probono/lawschools/

Association of American Law Schools
www.aals.org/probono/

Equal Justice Works
www.equaljusticeworks.org

PS Law Net
www.pslawnet.org

REFLECTIONS ON...

Law Student Pro Bono

Incorporating pro bono into your career connects you with communities and legal rights that may lie outside your primary area of practice. Once you start practicing, you can easily lose sight of the large population that cannot access the law and the important rights conveyed therein. Besides satisfying our obligation as attorneys to assist the underserved, pro bono brings perspective to your practice and ensures that attorneys remain connected to economically-diverse communities in Chicago.

Jordan M. Heinz, Kirkland & Ellis LLP

As a lawyer or a law student, doing pro bono work results in many layers of rewards. Professionally, pro bono work provides you with experience that you may not otherwise get early in your career. Personally, it is extremely satisfying to take action with regard to an issue as opposed to just passively reacting to it. And socially, you are using your particular skills to help the world around you. For example, as a law student, I volunteered to monitor an election site after the United States Department of Justice found race-based election abuses in a town near my law school. The experience taught me to speak out when I saw abuses of authority, allowed me to be a friendly and reassuring face for unsure voters who came to vote, and, I like to think it made those running the voting location think twice before infringing on someone's voting rights. The experience led me to continue my legal work to ensure that all individuals have unobstructed access to a vote.

Reena R. Bajowala, Jenner & Block LLP

I began my pro bono practice in law school, volunteering at the Northwestern Bluhm Legal Clinic on post-conviction and federal habeas proceedings on behalf of criminal defendants, including working with the clinic as a PILI Fellow after graduation. Since that time, I have worked on behalf of pro bono clients on a number of civil matters including asylum applications and discrimination suits. As a result of this representation, these clients have received relief that they may not have received without legal assistance and their expressed appreciation for my efforts is truly humbling. I again find myself working on behalf of a death row inmate in federal habeas proceedings, work that I find truly rewarding. As I discovered in my law school days working for the clinic, this work allows me not only to help indigent clients facing the death penalty, but provides an intellectual challenge in analyzing complex issues of constitutional law.

Justin L. Heather, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP

In law school, pro bono work provides what is usually the first chance for law students to gain practical experience. I spent time at a legal aid office my first year in law school and was amazed at how with even a small amount of legal training, I was able to offer support to people who were considered "disadvantaged" in one way or another and were often surprised to learn they had rights which deserved protection. I later represented asylum applicants through one of my law school's clinical programs, and I have continued my work with asylum seekers and immigration organizations now that I am in private practice. For me, pro bono work was a natural way of building on my previous commitment to volunteering by using new skills to improve my community.

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