

Why Do Pro Bono Work?

I. Professional Obligation

It is our ethical obligation as attorneys in Illinois to provide pro bono assistance to persons in need of legal services who cannot afford them.

The preamble to the Supreme Court of Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct provides, in pertinent part, 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.

II. Recruiting and Retention; Firm Morale

Competition for legal talent, whether at the summer associate, recent law school graduate, or lateral attorney level, can be intense. Firms with active pro bono programs enjoy a competitive advantage with many potential new firm attorneys, particularly when a new attorney may be deciding between firms with substantially similar or even identical salary structures. Entry level associates, in particular, are interested in and frequently ask about a firm's commitment to its pro bono program as part of the interview process.

In today's environment, attorneys are more mobile than at any time in the past with nearly 20 percent of associates leaving law firms each year. The costs of replacing departing attorneys are high (often involving recruitment fees and training expenses) and the time involved in transitioning a new attorney is substantial. A strong pro bono culture can contribute to a positive office environment and, in turn, strengthen attorney loyalty to the firm or corporation.

Finally, a successful pro bono program can provide opportunities for lawyers to work together as a team. Pro bono victories and awards can be shared with the entire office, fostering a sense of pride and accomplishment among attorneys and staff.

III. Training and Professional Development

Pro bono projects can be used as training vehicles to provide a wide variety of high quality skills training at a much lower cost than might otherwise be provided through client-paying work. Through pro bono work, junior attorneys may try cases and gain substantial client contact earlier in their career. With adequate supervision, junior attorneys can be afforded greater autonomy in a pro bono matter, offering meaningful work experience and accelerated professional development opportunities that benefit both the individual attorney and the employer.

IV. Firm Marketing

Pro bono is an effective marketing tool that can provide a firm or corporation with positive publicity, heightened visibility, improved client relationships, and evidence of good corporate citizenship.

V. Unmet Legal Needs

The most obvious and compelling reason to perform pro bono work is the need to address the gap between the millions of persons who need assistance but cannot afford or obtain it, and the limited resources available to meet those needs through legal service organizations. The assistance provided by volunteer attorneys is critical to supplement the full-time legal aid attorneys.