

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Do Your Part “For the Good” of Our Communities

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Pro bono is a Latin phrase that literally means “for the good.”

“Every lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay.” Nevada Rules of Professional Responsibility 6.1.

As attorneys, we are fortunate to be in a profession where our knowledge and education places us in a position to help others.

There are many ways a lawyer can do pro bono work. The most common is to represent a client in a case or legal matter for free or at a discounted rate. Criminal defense provides frequent opportunities for discounted-rate cases. When the public defender’s office has a conflict, counsel will be appointed in both state¹ and federal criminal cases.² The hourly rate is capped. For instance, in CJA cases (federal appointed cases), the hourly rate is \$158. As a result, the lawyer is performing a type of pro bono because they are providing legal services at a discounted rate.

Personally, the CJA panel was a natural fit for me because at the time I was appointed to the panel, I had practiced criminal defense for several years. However, being on the panel not only allowed me to use my skill set to help people, but also gave me a comfort level in federal court. In fact, despite having many accomplished criminal defense attorneys in my firm, I am now the go-to expert for questions about sentencing guidelines and other federal-specific rules. So, being on the

panel has not only been for the “good” of indigent clients, but also has had a benefit on my professional growth in my field of practice.

Probably not surprising, however, is that the biggest need for pro bono work involves cases where no fee is paid. Those matters are handled without any monetary compensation. Currently, Nevada has seen its biggest drop in attorneys taking pro bono cases. This means many Nevada citizens are unrepresented and navigating the legal system either on their own or not at all. ***Our community needs our help. Please consider taking one pro bono case.***

Legal aid organizations such as Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada (LACSN), Nevada Legal Services, and Northern Nevada Legal Aid have a wide range of cases that you can assist with. Landlord tenant, civil litigation, appeals, child custody, divorce, bankruptcy, criminal record sealing, evictions, guardianship, child advocacy, and civil rights cases are available through the various legal aid organizations in Nevada. With the variety of cases, there is an opportunity for every lawyer to take a case “for the good.”

This work also provides an opportunity to learn an area of law you are not familiar with. Providers offer CLE and mentorship to assist in understanding different practice areas. Further, many legal aid organizations provide resources, including pleading forms on their website, to help an attorney navigate through practice areas they may not be familiar with. For example, if you were to take a Children’s

Attorneys Project (CAP) case through LACSN, you are assigned a mentor to assist you through the case and answer any of your questions, and CLE courses are continually available on this topic.

In CAP cases, you represent a child who has been either abused or neglected. While the subject matter is heavy, taking these cases allows you to take a step out of your normal practice of law. You serve as the voice of the child, and to do so, you must build a rapport with your client. I build that relationship by social activities, usually involving food. This gives me an opportunity to sit down with my child client and talk about what is going on in their life, school, and friends in a comfortable setting. It also gives me an opportunity to work outside the office. Through the years, CAP cases have allowed me to continue to hone trial skills when my trial schedule has been light. CAP cases also give you an opportunity to participate in evidentiary hearings and trials where you can perfect your cross-examination skills, your opening statements, and evidentiary objections. But the best perk for taking a CAP case is the artwork your child client will make for you. You will know at that moment that you have made a difference.

In addition to taking cases, there are other ways you can fulfill your professional responsibility. You could participate in legal education programs (Mock Trial; Goldilocks, a program through the Young Lawyers Sections; Law Day; etc.) or partake in “Ask a Lawyer” sessions (short sessions in different areas of law where citizens seek guidance on the law and legal system).³ “Ask a Lawyer” programs are done in person, telephonically, and via Zoom.

Any lawyer, regardless of practice area, can find a way to service our community through pro bono. The opportunities are there. So, what are you going to do “for the good” of our community?

ENDNOTES:

1. Indigent Defense Information by County (nv.gov).
2. Criminal Justice Act Panel.
3. Ask-A-Lawyer - Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada (lacs.nv.org); Ask a Lawyer | Nevada Legal Services.