

## Op Ed: Celebrating Pro Bono Service in Arkansas

Lawyers are in the problem solving business. They recognize better than anyone the gap between legal need and legal aid. They recognize that Arkansas ranks 48<sup>th</sup> among dollars spent per poor person on civil legal aid. They recognize that approximately 80 percent of the legal needs of Americans of limited income remain unmet.

Arkansas lawyers are doing their part to change these statistics and to provide justice to all low income Arkansans through pro bono service, i.e. free legal service rendered in the same way it is rendered to a paying client. The Arkansas Access to Justice Commission encourages every Arkansas attorney to provide a minimum of 50 hours of pro bono service annually.

To highlight the role of pro bono service across America, lawyers will observe the second National Pro Bono Celebration Week, October 24-30. In Arkansas, organizations serving low-income citizens are encouraging law firms, corporate legal departments, government legal offices, judicial offices, and law schools to participate in its “Just Jeans” event by observing a casual Friday on October 29, 2010, with participating employees and students making a minimum suggested contribution of \$5. Contributions collected will go to the Access of Justice Foundation, which will distribute funds raised to the Center for Arkansas Legal Service and Legal Aid of Arkansas. For more information about how to volunteer or participate in the “Just Jeans” Pro Bono Week event, please visit [www.arkansasjustice.org](http://www.arkansasjustice.org).

Many attorneys in Arkansas provide much more pro bono service than the suggested minimum. In 2009, Joanne McCracken volunteered over 250 hours of service to the citizens of Benton County. James E. Crouch and Jon B. Comstock were also recognized as Outstanding Volunteer Attorneys in Benton and Washington Counties. They were among more than 800 volunteer attorneys who took pro bono cases in 2009. Their service had a value of \$935,600, according to Bill Waddell, President of the Arkansas Access to Justice Foundation.

On September 30, the Arkansas Access to Justice Commission and Foundation kicked off its 2010 funding raising and pro bono recruitment campaign in Little Rock. Chairperson Annabelle Imber Tuck, former Supreme Court Justice, said in her speech,

“When people with limited income and education face a corporation or government agency without representation because they cannot afford an attorney, the consequences for those individuals and their families can be devastating.” She stressed the important role volunteer attorney’s play in the work of the two Arkansas providers of legal aid.

Across the United States, more lawyers are devoting more hours to pro bono legal services than in the past. According to a study released by the American Bar Association, lawyers are doing pro bono work at nearly three times the rate that the general population does volunteer work. These figures demonstrate the concern that lawyers have for people and organizations in their communities. Among lawyers nationwide, the number of hours of free legal work has increased to 41 hours per lawyer per year in 2008.

Arkansas attorneys are serious about their commitment to pro bono. Jeff Puryear of Jonesboro says about his service through Legal Aid and Arkansas Volunteer Lawyers for the Elderly, “Through the contributions of many others, I was very fortunate to become an attorney. It is only fitting to give back to those in need of legal advice and who do not have necessary resources. Through these programs, I have the opportunity to help those who want so badly to believe in our court system and seek justice.”

Brent Capehart of Harrison has been a proponent of pro bono since beginning his practice in Boone County. He says, “I have been very fortunate, and I feel a responsibility to help people who need assistance.” John Blair of Rogers has been volunteering for over 25 years, handling over 100 bankruptcy cases for Legal Aid of Arkansas clients. About his pro bono service, he says, “Taking these cases is worth the effort. I feel better in my practice and enjoy the challenge.”

The legal community asks everyone to join with them in their efforts to serve the growing number of people in the state who have fallen on hard times. Volunteer help is a renewal resource, which is dependent only upon those willing to step up and help those in need. Pro bono service benefits all the citizens of the state should be recognized for its significant contribution to the state’s welfare.