

PLANNING PRO BONO WEEK – AN OPPORTUNITY TO COLLABORATE

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Recognize the Available Resources. Recognize the wealth of talent and resources available to you and utilize them. Create events that build on what you already have. So, for example, schedule two of your monthly pro bono practice group meetings during Pro Bono Week, and give a small gift (law firm pen? certificate? coffee mug?) to every lawyer and paralegal who handled a pro bono case this year.

Listen Well. Consult widely within your firm; develop programs that interest and generate enthusiasm among your colleagues. Consider scheduling a lunchtime “town hall” meeting during Pro Bono Week and ask lawyers to come and outline their “wish lists” for pro bono projects.

Create Partnerships or Plan Collaboratively With Those Already In Place. Legal services and public interest attorneys are indispensable partners for pro bono attorneys. Invite five public interest attorneys (from five different legal services agencies) to attend the “town hall” meeting (see Listen Well above), and ask them to react to the pro bono proposals the firm’s lawyers articulate.

Build Internal Expertise. The national Pro Bono Week provides an opportunity to deepen your firm’s commitment to pro bono; use it to develop expertise in a new substantive area. Consider launching one or more new “practice groups” focused on specific poverty law issues that firm lawyers care about. Examples include domestic violence, immigration and asylum, and prisoner civil rights. Find a matching legal services agency or public interest law center that will feed cases to the firm, attend practice group meetings and mentor the pro bono lawyers as they learn.

Delegate and Trust. Use the Celebration as an opportunity to strengthen the firm’s commitment to pro bono by delegating responsibility to other partners and associates. Add a partner “co-chair” for practice groups you already have. Identify senior associates with a strong pro bono record whom you can trust to carry the torch in specific areas and help them to join the boards of public interest law center or name them as “contact persons” for firm pro bono work with those agencies.

Get Out Into The Community. Plan events that get law firm pro bono leaders more actively involved and visible in the community, such as conducting a legal clinic at a community center or town hall, at which one or more law firm partners “preside” with the legal services partnering agency. Invite a judge or city councilman to attend the clinic and say a few words at the start or the finish. Such immersion will help ensure that law firm leaders know what’s going on in their communities, what new and urgent areas of need are emerging and whom to contact to build partnerships that will work.

Take Chances. Be creative in reaching out to others and building partnerships, and be willing to try new things without a precedent as a guide or a clear sense of outcome. Call a law center you have never worked with before, and ask if they would like to conduct a one-time legal clinic with your firm during Pro Bono Week. Risk-taking guided by experience, instincts and judgment can be key to developing policies and practices that effectively meet difficult poverty law challenges. The Celebration provides an excellent opportunity to take a considered risk.

Secure Leadership From The Top. Law firms, like corporations and foundations, are hierarchical. To build a strong and expanding pro bono program, seek out more vocal support from executive committees, chairpersons and managing partners. Interview law firm leaders and publish a piece on the firm’s intranet or by press release during Pro Bono Week that quotes the reasons why these leaders have done pro bono themselves, what a difference it makes or why firm fee clients want the firm to do pro bono. In short, encourage partner leadership by involving them in Celebration planning and events.

Say Thank You Early and Often. One of the biggest factors in ensuring that a pro bono program succeeds is to create methods by which the firm and its leadership show appreciation to those who do pro bono. Find a way to say “thank you” during pro bono week that is unique, and that is “startling” to firm lawyers. Give them hats or coffee mugs with the firm’s logo that say “Pro bono lawyer”. Give them free lunch certificates for the cafeteria. Give them anything that shows the firm has noticed.

Keep Collaboration in the Forefront. The common element in all the suggestions above is that collaboration is essential to success. By involving as many of the key stakeholders as possible, the chances of developing an effective pro bono program that addresses the concerns of all and that taps into available resources to develop meaningful solutions increases exponentially. Announce during Pro Bono Week that the firm will convene a strategic planning event of lawyers and paralegals, along with key outside stakeholders, to collaboratively plan next steps to increase access to justice in an emerging area of need in your city, state or region.
