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TECH TURBULENCE: Helping Hands

By Pam Weisz

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The legal staff at Los Angeles' Alliance for Children's Rights spend their days fighting for the rights of abused and impoverished children. While they have always relied on pro bono lawyers to help with this important work, they have recently seen a noticeable uptick in interest.

"We have been contacted by a number of attorneys who are willing to donate their time while they look for other employment," observes Diego Cartagena, the Alliance's pro bono coordinator. While he sympathizes with those who have lost jobs at firms, Cartagena is thrilled to get the extra help. "It's been fantastic. It means that we can multiply the number of clients that we can reach at any one time."

In addition to gaining part-time volunteers, the Alliance has also taken on a fellow who was laid off, but given the option of working at a nonprofit for a year at a reduced salary.

The Alliance's clients are not the only ones who benefit. The volunteers continue to practice law. "We offer real, substantive hands-on work: writing briefs, conducting research, representing clients in court," he says.

At a time of great uncertainty in the legal profession, pro bono work can be extremely valuable for attorneys, even beyond the satisfaction of helping someone in need. Those who have lost jobs, had start dates deferred, or face a work lull can keep their skills sharp.

"Pro bono work can be a really exceptional way to gain experience," says Amanda Smith, a pro bono partner at Morgan Lewis, based in New York City.

Keeping skills fresh will prove beneficial when the job market improves, agrees Ann Israel, president of Ann Israel & Associates, a New York-based legal search firm. Attorneys who do pro bono work or take public interest jobs "are going to be the ones who get hired first," she said. "If you're not doing anything, you better go do that pro bono work."

TECHNOLOGY

For attorneys who want to get involved in pro bono work but are unsure how to begin, Pro Bono Net can help. We are a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing access to justice. Our flagship website, www.probono.net, is used by local legal aid and pro bono groups around the country to recruit, train, and support volunteer attorneys. The site runs on a Cold Fusion-based custom content management system, with a SQL server database.

Attorneys register with the site at no charge, and can then access a database of pro bono opportunities, searchable by location and area of interest. In addition to listing available opportunities, probono.net offers a wide range of resources, including:

- A calendar of training opportunities.
- Listservs to reach other legal professionals who are working on similar matters.
- A library of practice resources and training manuals, webinars, podcasts, and videos.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

The resource materials are developed by hundreds of nonprofit legal aid organizations around the country that have partnered with Pro Bono Net. Registered members (currently, more than 50,000) can join specialized areas based on topic or geography.



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A new regional site, The SoCal Pro Bono Center, is launching in June to support pro bono attorneys throughout Southern California.

In addition to offering the website, Pro Bono Net also addresses how technology can improve the delivery of legal services. We run a national online document assembly program that helps pro bono attorneys, as well as self-represented litigants, to correctly and completely fill out legal documents using interactive templates.

In Georgia and Pennsylvania, for example, pro bono attorneys without expertise in housing law are able to work on foreclosure cases, using online document assembly and basic training modules. This is similar to the Wills for Heroes (www.willsforheroes.org) program that won LTN's 2007 Pro Bono Award. (See <http://tinyurl.com/LTN96PB>.)

Another Pro Bono Net program, LiveHelp, offers online support via real-time chat. For example, attorneys volunteering with the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Project used LiveHelp to answer questions from people facing legal issues after Hurricane Ike.

Amanda Smith, of Morgan Lewis, reminds us that all attorneys can benefit from pro bono, regardless of their career path.

"Pro bono work can be an incredible opportunity for skill development no matter what practice group you are in," she said. For example, while pro bono work is often seen as litigation-focused, "for a junior transactional attorney, taking on the representation of a nonprofit in employment, tax or corporate governance questions can provide very valuable skill development," she said.

Similarly, pro bono work at the Alliance for Children's Rights provides experience in transactional and litigation related fields, Cartagena says. "It's an opportunity to practice legal research and writing, oral advocacy skills, even some contracts-based work."

Of course the biggest reward is providing muchneeded legal help for someone who may have nowhere else to turn. "It can be a rewarding and visceral experience for the attorney, especially now when there are really people suffering," Smith says.

Legal aid organizations hope such experiences will resonate and carry into participants' next positions. Those now volunteering at the Alliance for Children's Rights "are the individuals that can plant the seeds for further pro bono work at a firm," hopes Cartagena.

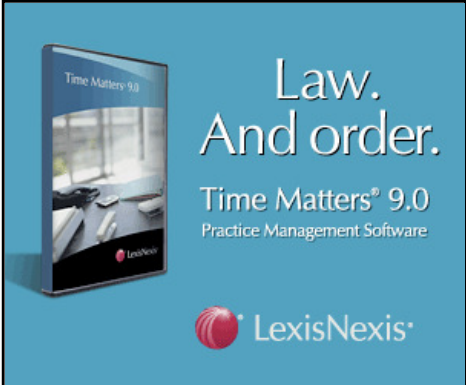
To find out more about opportunities to get involved in pro bono in your community, visit us online at www.probono.net/oppsguide. Click on the interactive map to search for organizations that offer projects in areas of law that match the skills and experience you have to offer. Or check the national pro bono training calendar to find an upcoming event where you can learn new skills and get matched up with clients who need your help.

Pam Weisz is director of communications at Pro Bono Net, based in New York City.

E-mail: pweisz@probono.net

Incisive Media's CEO William Pollak serves on the Pro Bono Net board of directors.

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