



How Law Firms Can Champion Service through Pro Bono and Community Outreach

By Mary Frances Palisano

In New Jersey, the need for assisting low-income individuals is profound and multifaceted. These individuals frequently face a complex tapestry of challenges—from food and housing insecurity to a lack of access to legal justice and economic opportunity. Without intervention, these issues create a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break, negatively impacting individuals, their children, and the wider community. Providing support is not just an act of kindness; it is an imperative that fosters a more resilient and equitable society. As New Jersey lawyers, we have the unique power to make a meaningful difference, and the legal profession has a strong tradition of embracing this responsibility, moving beyond the simple fulfillment of minimum pro bono requirements.¹

A comprehensive pro bono program is a clear demonstration of a law firm's commitment to social responsibility and service, which can significantly enhance its reputation among clients, the public, and other lawyers. This dedication often generates positive media attention, leading to awards and recognition in legal publications. Additionally, many corporate clients increasingly prioritize working with firms that have strong pro bono and community outreach initiatives. Leading firms are strategically championing service through pro bono and community outreach—an approach that not only enriches the community but also strengthens the firm itself.

This article explores how a firm's commitment to service can amplify the reach and effectiveness of its business development, strengthen its culture, and enhance professional development, all while building a more just and equitable society.

The Cornerstone of Law Firm Service: Pro Bono

What is Pro Bono?

Pro bono legal work, derived from the Latin phrase *pro bono publico* (“for the public good”),² is a cornerstone of the law firm service. It refers to legal services that lawyers provide without compensation, with the primary goal of serving the public interest.

The ethical obligation for lawyers to perform pro bono work stems from the fundamental principle that every individual deserves access to justice, regardless of their financial status. The legal profession recognizes that a system of justice cannot be truly fair if it is only accessible to those who can afford it. As a result, lawyers are seen as having a special responsibility to use their unique skills to bridge the gap.³

Pro bono work is distinguished from other forms of volunteering because it

leverages a lawyer's unique professional skills and training to address legal issues faced by low-income individuals. The need for this service is staggering. A recent report by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) found that low-income Americans do not receive any or enough legal help for 92% of their civil legal problems⁴. Unfortunately, this means that millions of people are forced to navigate complex issues—like eviction, domestic violence, or special education services for a child with disabilities—without legal guidance.

Benefits to the Community

Pro bono work fills the gap in legal services for low-income individuals, nonprofits, and marginalized communities, giving all individuals equal access to justice. Examples of pro bono work in New Jersey include helping a victim of domestic violence secure a restraining order, assisting a nonprofit with corporate formation, or helping an individual file for an expungement so they can finally seek out higher paying employment to improve their families' financial circumstances, to name a few. Pro bono efforts can also tackle larger, systemic problems, such as challenging unjust policies or representing groups fighting for civil rights.

Pro bono work helps people like Kate, whose daughter is severely autistic and was not attending school because the local school district could not find an appropriate placement for her. Kate didn't know what to do and couldn't afford a lawyer to assist. Her daughter was out of school for almost an entire school year! A pro bono team from my firm's Gibbons Cares pro bono platform stepped in, navigated the legal process, and ultimately helped her child obtain a placement. This act of pro bono service didn't just get Kate's daughter back in school; it provided the ability for Kate to go back to

work so she could help support her family that was living in poverty.

Benefits to the Law Firm

Pro bono work provides a wide range of tangible benefits to law firms, extending far beyond satisfying an attorney's desire to do good. It is an investment that significantly enhances a firm's reputation, attracts and retains top talent, and offers crucial professional development opportunities.

Professional Development: For many associates, pro bono cases are a powerful engine for professional growth, offering hands-on experience often inaccessible in traditional billable work. Unlike matters where less experienced lawyers may be limited to research, pro bono cases frequently put them in the driver's seat. They gain invaluable experience in managing a case from start to finish, including client interviews, negotiations, and drafting of motions, where



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they will be lead counsel. Most critically, pro bono work provides opportunities for courtroom experience, from arguing motions to being first chair at a trial—foundational skills that are becoming increasingly rare for junior litigators. By taking on this work, associates build confidence, develop essential client-facing skills, and establish a proven track record of advocacy, all under the supportive mentorship of more experienced attorneys.

Recruitment & Retention: A robust pro bono program has become a powerful strategic asset in the competition for legal talent. For socially conscious law students and associates, a firm's commitment to pro bono is often a significant factor, signaling that the firm's values align with their own. Beyond initial recruitment, pro bono is a critical tool for retaining experienced lawyers, providing them with an outlet to find a sense of fulfillment that billable work may not always offer. By providing a platform for lawyers to grow professionally while making a tangible difference, a strong pro bono program not only attracts the best and brightest but also cultivates a loyal and dedicated workforce.

Business Development: Pro bono work offers a significant strategic advantage for business development, especially for more seasoned attorneys. By collaborating with existing clients on pro bono matters or free legal clinics, lawyers can deepen those relationships and demonstrate a shared commitment to community values. It also provides a unique way to hone legal skills or even expand a lawyer's legal practice areas. For instance, a lawyer focused on transactional matters could take on a pro bono case that requires litigation, gaining valuable experience from arguing motions to questioning witnesses. By taking on pro bono matters, lawyers can also venture into new and emerging practice areas without the pressure of a billable clock. For example, a volunteer attorney can develop expertise

that can later be leveraged into a new practice group. In this way, pro bono is not merely an ethical obligation but also a strategic tool that facilitates continuous professional growth and expands a lawyer's network and expertise, which can lead to new business opportunities.

Furthermore, pro bono projects often lead to valuable networking opportunities, connecting lawyers with a diverse range of contacts—from public interest leaders and judges to in-house counsel. These relationships can help a lawyer build a reputation for excellence that can ultimately generate referrals and new business, attract new clients, and expand the firm's market presence.

Building a Law Firm Pro Bono Program

Implementing a successful pro bono program requires a strategic and comprehensive approach, beginning with securing a commitment from firm leadership. A strong program also needs a designated firm partner to champion and manage the initiative, often in conjunction with a pro bono committee and administrative assistance. The firm should then define the program's purpose, identifying specific community needs to address, such as veterans' issues, landlord-tenant matters, advocacy for children, or civil rights. A clear mission aligns the program with the firm's values and other existing firm programs, ensuring that pro bono work is not an isolated effort but rather a central part of the firm's culture, client service model, and strategic vision.

It is also crucial to establish a strong internal and external communication strategy. Internally, firms must actively promote the program, highlight success stories, and keep attorneys informed about available projects to maintain engagement. Externally, building and maintaining relationships with pro bono providers, nonprofit organizations, and other partners is essential for sourcing quality cases, involvement in clinics, and other pro bono projects.

To ensure the program's effectiveness and efficiency, a firm must also formalize clear policies and procedures, including precisely defining what qualifies as pro bono work, establishing goals for participation, creating a process for handling conflict checks, and developing procedures for onboarding of new pro bono cases, status reporting, and completion of case closings.

Finally, to sustain momentum and celebrate the firm's commitment, it is critical to implement a system for tracking pro bono hours, publicly recognizing individual and team contributions, and regularly sharing powerful success stories that showcase the program's positive impact.

Community Outreach Service Efforts

Service isn't limited to providing legal counsel; it encompasses a broader range of community engagement. In addition to financial and in-kind donations, law firms can support local charities, schools, and nonprofits by having lawyers and staff volunteer their time for non-legal activities, such as serving on the boards of nonprofits, mentoring students, or participating in community service days.

Setting up a successful community outreach program is a strategic way to build brand reputation, attract talent, and elevate a firm's core values. By embracing a multifaceted approach, law firms can demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility, strengthen their brand, and make a tangible difference in the lives of their community neighbors. Firms can start by defining their core values and identifying specific causes that resonate with their team, and then create a dedicated committee or a formal platform to centralize efforts and empower employees to lead projects. A firm should then actively promote the program internally and celebrate successes to foster a sense of teamwork, while also communicating its

commitment to clients and the public to enhance its brand and social reputation.

For example, the Gibbons Cares community outreach platform reflects the firm as a proud member of its business communities. Gibbons Cares targets its outreach to maximize impact and avoid dilution of its messages and goals. One area of the Gibbons Cares community outreach is helping children, youth, and the next generation of leaders. For example, the firm holds backpack and school supplies drives. Since 2008, it has hosted a week-long internship for urban students from the New Jersey Law and Education Empowerment Project (NJ LEEP), where they learn about the practice of law and compete in a Moot Courtroom debate. The firm also provides ongoing support to the Boys & Girls Club of Newark, which began in 2016 with the “adoption” of eight families for the holidays and has since expanded to granting between 50 and 100 family wishes annually.

Conclusion

For New Jersey law firms, a commitment to service through pro bono and community outreach is more than an ethical duty—in many instances, it can be leveraged into a strategic advantage. Pro bono and community outreach

have the potential to be life-changing initiatives while offering law firms opportunities for professional growth, strengthening firm culture and business development. The legal profession has a unique role in shaping a more just and equitable society, and law firms of any size can be involved in service. Getting involved in service is a powerful reminder of why many of us chose this profession in the first place—to make a difference. ■

Endnotes

1. New Jersey has a system where attorneys may be court-assigned pro bono cases, known as *Madden* cases for indigent litigants in certain matters, including representing individuals accused of violating restraining order and parole revocation proceedings. The name *Madden* case is coined from the landmark decision by the New Jersey Supreme Court that reaffirmed the ethical and professional duty of attorneys to represent indigent clients without compensation when the state has not provided a public defender. *Madden v. Delran*, 126 N.J. 591, 601 A.2d 211 (1992). Attorneys can be exempt from these

assignments if they have performed 25 hours of voluntary pro bono hours though an approved pro bono provider, as noted in the New Jersey attorney annual registration process pursuant to New Jersey Court Rule 1:21-12.

2. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pro%20bono%20publico.
3. This professional responsibility is also memorialized in the American Bar Association (ABA) Model Rules of Professional Conduct, which serves as a guide for most state bar associations. ABA Model Rule 6.1 sets a clear ethical standard for the profession, emphasizing that pro bono service is not merely a charitable act but a fundamental duty that all lawyers should strive to fulfill. By dedicating their time and expertise, lawyers help ensure that the legal system is a tool for justice for everyone, not just for the privileged.
4. Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans* (2022).