

HIGHLIGHTING PRO BONO IN NEW MEXICO

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Pro Bono and the History of PRO BONO MONTH in New Mexico

As the American Bar Association website states, "Pro bono work is a professional responsibility and an individual ethical commitment of each lawyer." Naturally, it makes sense for our national legal community to honor pro bono with an annual weeklong celebration – the National Celebration of Pro Bono. Now that we are about to enter Pro Bono Month, it seems appropriate to provide a brief explanation of pro bono and the history of this celebration in New Mexico.

Pro Bono is a shortened reference to *pro bono publico*, which in Latin means "for the public good." As a part of our professional responsibility, lawyers are expected to provide some amount of free legal services, also known as pro bono services, to those who are unable to pay. The New Mexico Rules of Professional Conduct 16-601 through 16-605 give detailed instructions about what is considered pro bono service. We are fortunate in New Mexico because we have many organizations serving people of limited means, and these organizations are always looking for volunteer attorneys. The opportunities to do pro bono service are considerable, and include direct representation of clients, providing legal advice over the phone at teleclinics, providing legal advice and assistance with simple court forms at in-person legal clinics or fairs, and contributing financial support to organizations that provide legal services to persons of limited means or promote improvement of the law, the legal system or the legal profession. The rules also consider pro bono services to be the provision of legal services without fee or expectation of a fee to charitable, religious, civic, community, governmental and educational organizations in matters that are designed primarily to address the needs of persons of limited means.

Pro Bono is so important, it is annually celebrated around the entire nation. Founded in 2009 by the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service, the National Celebration of Pro Bono falls annually during the final week of October. The American Bar Association was the first legal institution to establish a weeklong nationwide event recognizing the importance of pro bono work. On its website, the ABA states that during the past several National Celebrations of Pro Bono, thousands of sponsors coordinated over 10,000 events in 50 states, a number of territories and Canada. National Celebration of Pro Bono week has been instrumental in boosting pro bono legal representation, and it brings pro bono work the attention it warrants.

Here, in New Mexico, we don't just celebrate Pro Bono for one week a year; our annual Celebration of Pro Bono lasts for the entire month of October. But why is that? Pro Bono has been a topic of conversation in New Mexico for a long time. The high level of poverty in New Mexico, combined with our state's largely rural nature, can make accessing legal services a challenge. Our legal community understands that although it is just one piece of the puzzle, pro bono services are essential to providing access to justice. Therefore, although the ABA's Pro Bono Week is celebrated the last week in October, here in New Mexico, we have expanded the celebration to encompass all of October!

Pro Bono is an area where New Mexico has been a national leader; we have created unique pro bono opportunities designed for our state's needs. For example, the Legal Services and Programs Committee of the State Bar was conducting virtual legal fairs using Skype years prior to the onset of the pandemic – long before anyone had heard of Zoom. Another pro bono opportunity, which is especially helpful in a state of our geographic size, is the pro bono teleclinics sponsored by New Mexico Legal Aid's Volunteer Attorney Pool. Because of the rural nature of our state, teleclinics are very useful in increasing access to pro bono legal services for people who not only can't afford an attorney, but who also are hours from the nearest courthouse or attorney's office.

During Pro Bono Month in New Mexico, there are increased opportunities to provide pro bono service and representation to New Mexicans in need which results in a large increase in pro bono services provided. Pro bono representation binds communities together in very important ways by bringing together courts, legal service providers, attorneys, and New Mexico residents of limited means. New Mexico's Pro Bono Month provides opportunities for us to work in our communities collaboratively to serve those in need, and it is an inspiring annual tradition to look forward to each year. And of course, let's not forget that the act of doing pro bono work is itself very fun, enjoyable, and inspiring for many, many reasons.