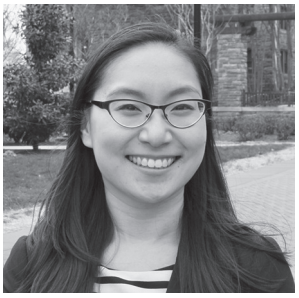


Help Me If You Can: Increasing Community Engagement and Access to Legal Aid Through Pro Bono Programs

By Megan Reinprecht, Staff Attorney and Bucks County Pro Bono Coordinator,[1] *Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania*[2]

Legal aid offices have cases streaming in every day. Staff attorneys may need to-do lists, weekly planners, Outlook calendars, and monthly case reviews just to keep track of all their cases. So, when pro bono is mentioned, especially recruiting and supervising pro bono volunteers, it is easy to sigh and think, "more work." More work on top of a full caseload. How do staff attorneys possibly have time to engage with pro bono volunteers too?



Learning from my role as both a Staff Attorney and Bucks County Pro Bono Coordinator at Legal Aid of Southeastern PA (LASP), even though pro bono engagement takes substantial investments of time and effort, volunteers increase community engagement and access to legal assistance. They help a legal aid office help more people.

How does Pro Bono Help a legal Aid Office?

Pro bono volunteers enable a legal aid office to work on more cases. However, the stats really put into perspective the amount of help that pro bono volunteers provide. In fiscal year 2023-24, pro bono volunteers assisted LASP with **532 cases**. The largest area of pro bono help was representing plaintiffs in Protection from Abuse (PFA) cases. Other significant areas were estate planning, child custody, divorce, housing, and criminal record clearing (expungements).

Additionally, LASP's pro bono program creates awareness of legal aid within the local bar. I will never forget being at one bar association event in a room full of attorneys, and when I introduced myself, as a LASP attorney, another attorney asked if I was a public defender. I explained that LASP handles *civil* legal issues. I was surprised to hear an experienced attorney conflate the public defender's office with a legal aid organization.

At other bar association events, I have formally presented on LASP's services. These presentations educate attorneys and community partners about the types of cases LASP handles and how to refer individuals to LASP. I enjoy these presentations because I always get the feedback like: "I did not know your office did that! I know some people to refer to you." In this way, LASP indirectly reaches individuals who would not otherwise know how to find free legal help.

Similarly, anytime LASP hosts interns or student volunteers, it is an opportunity to educate them about legal aid. As a first-generation law student, I did not know much about legal aid before I interviewed for an internship at LASP. I was amazed to hear how many types of cases legal aid handles, and how legal aid helps the most vulnerable populations. Now, in every internship or volunteer interview, I get to talk about LASP and all the great things my colleagues do. Like me, maybe that student will find themselves drawn to a career in legal aid and public interest law.

Furthermore, pro bono projects directly connect individuals who may not be aware of legal aid to free legal representation. For instance, one pro bono project at LASP involves direct representation of tenants in eviction cases. Each week, LASP and the Bucks County Bar Association partner to represent tenants at the Magisterial District Court in Morrisville, PA. Even though the court provides tenants with information about LASP, most of them do not apply for services

Help Me If You Can,
Continued from page 43

ahead of their hearing date. LASP staff go to court and offer legal service on the day of the hearing. Even tenants who do not qualify for LASP can receive assistance from a pro bono attorney. Consequently, tenants receive free legal representation at a critical court proceeding.

If tenants qualify, LASP may open a file for further representation by a staff attorney. Recently, LASP opened four files for tenants to be represented in appealing their evictions. Clients may subsequently be referred to colleagues for other legal issues. Or they may refer family members or friends to LASP. Thus, LASP may provide advice on multiple legal issues, to an individual who would not have known about legal aid if they had not received the initial pro bono help.

Again, it is obvious that pro bono volunteers increase LASP's caseload capacity. Still, it is important to remember how spreading awareness of legal aid through pro bono programs also expands community engagement and access to legal aid.

How does LASP Recruit Pro Bono Volunteers?

Most pro bono recruitment is done through the county bar association or school internships. However, LASP has recently employed other creative ways to recruit pro bono volunteers.

LASP is an accredited continuing legal education course (CLE) provider. Consequently, staff attorneys can present CLEs in conjunction with clinics or other pro bono programs. In the Wills for Heroes program, pro bono attorneys draft and execute estate planning documents for first responders and veterans. LASP held similar wills clinics for seniors earlier this year. Before the clinics, LASP offered pro bono attorneys a CLE about Preparing Estate Planning Documents, free in exchange for volunteering at one of the clinics. Similarly, LASP held a free CLE called Representing Tenants Facing Eviction in Magisterial District Court ahead of the eviction defense project in Morrisville. Attendees were expected to volunteer at the weekly eviction hearings.

Another recent creative idea was LASP's Spring Break Project. This pro bono project was aimed at law school students who have pro bono hour requirements for graduation. Instead of committing to a full internship or fitting in hours during the busy school year, these law school students volunteered over their spring break. The first day included an introduction to Legal Aid, basics on ethics and client skills, and a tour of several offices. Over the rest of the week, the students worked on estate planning and record-clearing cases. They interviewed clients and drafted documents. They also heard from different staff attorneys about other practice areas and observed hearings at the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas in Norristown, PA.

Recruiting volunteers for short-term commitments can result in long-term help. If the volunteer enjoys their experience at the Spring Break Project or working at a clinic, they may be willing to come back for more clinics or an internship. For instance, one student volunteer joined LASP for a record-clearing clinic. She was so inspired by the event that she applied for an internship. After the internship, she continued to volunteer part-time with LASP, helped at many clinics and ultimately worked on many cases.

Finally, LASP makes full use of the internet and social media to recruit pro bono volunteers. LASP is participating in a pilot program using Pro Bono Matters to post volunteer opportunities including cases and clinics. The opportunities are published on LASP's website and can also be pushed to other sites that recruit volunteers, like Pro Bono Net. This project will ultimately expand the reach of LASP's pro bono recruiting without increasing the workload.

LASP's Communications team also posts specific volunteer opportunities on social media. Seeing opportunities that are one-day, limited representation effectively attracts new volunteers.

Pro bono recruitment is not without its challenges and setbacks. For example, publicizing a *free* CLE will always grab attention and draw an attendance. But if the attendees do not volunteer for the clinic or pro bono project afterwards, the CLE may not have been productive from a recruitment standpoint. LASP has tried workarounds, such as charging for the CLE and then giving refunds to attendees who volunteer, or getting sponsors for the CLE. Unfortunately, neither tactic seems to improve the number of volunteers. Consequently, I try to ask at bar association events — what are the types of cases that attorneys *want* to work on? If I know there is already interest in a particular area, then it will be easier to recruit volunteers for those cases.

Another challenge is asking the same volunteers to help at clinics and pro bono projects. For example, In Bucks County, many attorneys already volunteer for the PFA hearings every Wednesday. It can be difficult to ask them if they can also come to a custody clinic, or take a divorce case, or draft estate planning documents. LASP's pro bono team is very conscious of whether a new

project calls for the same volunteers and tries to vary projects to appeal to volunteers with different interests and skill sets.

How does LASP Retain Pro Bono Volunteers?

When someone expresses an interest in volunteering, LASP tries to assign them a case as soon as possible so they stay interested. The goal is to provide a good experience so they will volunteer to take more cases. It is frustrating to train or supervise volunteers through a whole case, only for them to disappear afterwards.

LASP provides important support beyond CLEs and recorded trainings. These include: 1) samples, and 2) access. Samples are two-fold — fill-in-the-blank petitions and finished products. Nobody wants to start drafting from scratch. Creating fill-in-the-blank petitions for certain case types is a great student volunteer project. Student volunteers also can get updated information from the courthouse. Having updated samples ensures a pro bono volunteer that the case is not going to take a lot of their time, and they have guidance on what they should be doing with the client.

It is also important to be accessible to volunteers. It is not easy to carve out time to return phone calls, reply to emails quickly, or set up virtual meetings, but doing so allows the volunteer to keep the case moving and complete it efficiently and effectively.

For pro bono volunteers helping at a clinic or project setting, a LASP staff attorney is always at the event to offer assistance. At some pro bono projects, like the weekly PFA hearings, a more experienced volunteer may offer to mentor a newer volunteer.

Lastly, it is vital to think through other "leg work" that will make a case, clinic, or project smooth and easy for volunteers. Has LASP talked to the client about expectations, such as who will contact whom first, whether they will have to travel to a different office, and the scope of the attorney's representation? Has LASP called clients to remind them about attending a clinic? Can LASP fill out intake documents, screen for eligibility, etc.?

If volunteers can focus on the client, they will have a better pro bono experience. When asked why he enjoys doing pro bono work, one attorney volunteer answered, "[B]ecause I go into it knowing it has a tangible positive impact on people who need [help] the most. I feel we're very blessed and fortunate to be in this very prestigious and historically significant line of work, so I see it as the responsibility of our profession to contribute meaningfully where we can.... We have the ability to [solve people's legal issues], so it's our responsibility to jump in and make an impact.... It's different from my caseload in that it triggers more empathy on my end.... When I talk to pro bono clients, they often have stories that I can relate to personally in some aspects, so I almost get a sense of personal investment in their success."

It is important to acknowledge the amount of time and energy it takes to recruit and supervise pro bono volunteers. However, it is all worth it to grow community engagement and increase access to legal aid. Providing thorough training and supervision to pro bono volunteers allows them to take case after case. Offering an enjoyable internship or pro bono experience may influence volunteers to become public interest attorneys or even join LASP. Developing better relationships with community partners such as courts, bar associations, schools, and other organizations will increase awareness of legal aid for legal professionals and clients.

1 Megan Reinprecht joined Legal Aid of Southeastern PA (LASP) in September 2020 as Community Engagement Unit Staff Attorney and was named Bucks County Pro Bono Coordinator in July 2021. Megan holds a J.D. from Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law and a bachelor's degree in history, *cum laude*, from Bryn Athyn College. Megan was very involved in pro bono work in law school, where she co-chaired weekly clinics and volunteered to fundraise for public interest fellowships. Megan has also supervised and trained volunteers in the Community Engagement Unit, where she also interned during law school. Megan's practice focuses on criminal record-clearing, including expungements and pardons. She served as a Judicial Law Clerk for the Superior Court of New Jersey, Middlesex County in 2019-20, Certified Legal Intern for the Defender Association of Philadelphia in 2019, LASP Legal Intern in 2018, and a Certified Legal Intern in the Montgomery County Public Defender's Office in 2017 and 2018. She currently serves as a co-chair of the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN)'s Asian Pacific American (APA) Affinity Group. Megan may be reached at *mreinprecht@lasp.org*.

2 Legal Aid of Southeastern PA serves Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties in the Philadelphia suburbs. lasp.org/pro-bono.

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JOURNAL

VOLUME XXXIX NO. 2 SUMMER 2024

From the *Journal* Committee 2

REGULAR ARTICLES

Small But Mighty — The Joys and Challenges of Managing a Small Legal Aid Agency 3
By Shelby King Gaddy, Executive Director, Legal Services of the Virgin Islands; Lisa Noley, Grants Coordinator, Oklahoma Indian Legal Services and Stephanie Hudson, Executive Director, Oklahoma Indian Legal Services; Sam Abel-Palmer, Executive Director, Legal Services Vermont

Let's Get Direct about Indirects: What You Need to Know about a NICRA for Your Federal Grants and Contracts 8
By Karen Lash, Consultant; Rosie Dawn Griffin, Partner and Scott Sheffler, Partner, Feldesman Leifer LLP

FEATURE ARTICLES

In Memoriam: Remembering the Life and Work Phyllis Holmen 14
By Bucky Askew

2023 MIE Fundraising Survey Summary (Collected January 2024) 15
By Jared Smith

Reflections on LSC's 50th Anniversary and almost 50 Years of Legal Aid Fundraising 17
By Steve Gottlieb, Former Executive Director, Atlanta Legal Aid Society

Crossword Puzzle: Just the Ticket 19

SPECIAL FEATURE: INTAKE AND BEYOND: CLIENT ACCESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

ACCESS THROUGH INTAKE

Doorway or Barrier: Increasing Access, Scope, and Efficiency through Intake Procedures 20
By Alex Yates, Paralegal and Lila Sevener, Staff Attorney, Philadelphia Legal Assistance Medical Legal Community Partnership

An Intake System for Processing High Volumes of Applications 25
By Carolyn Turley and Nick Whitaker, Directing Attorneys, Lone Star Legal Aid

ACCESS THROUGH OUTREACH

Dream Big — Start Small: The Story of "Access Justice" 27
By Amanda M. Pearl, Regional Director, Legal Services of Southern Missouri

Project Lazarus: Building Trust Through Outreach Work to Connect Chronically Homeless Individuals to Legal Services 30
By Daniel Rowinsky, Staff Attorney, Legal Services of Greater Miami

Striving to Center Dignity Through Language Justice 34
By Chi-Ser Tran, Supervising Attorney, Community Legal Services (Philadelphia)

ACCESS THROUGH PRO BONO

Proactive Pro Bono 37
By Adam Heintz, Director of Pro Bono, Legal Services NYC

Help Me If You Can: Increasing Community Engagement and Access to Legal Aid Through Pro Bono Programs 43
By Megan Reinprecht, Staff Attorney and Pro Bono Coordinator, LASP

ACCESS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

So Close, Yet So Far — State Policies on AI Mean a Call to Action for Legal Aids 46
By Dane Henry, Advocacy, Training, and Technology Attorney, Legal Aid of West Virginia

Modernizing Rural Access to Justice 49
By Scheree M. Gilchrist, Chief Innovation Officer and Director, LANC

Harnessing Technology and Collaboration to Transform Civil Legal Aid Access 54
By Lu Jiang, Pro Bono Manager, Legal Counsel for Youth and Children



SPECIAL FEATURE
INTAKE AND BEYOND: CLIENT ACCESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT