

Making the Business Case for Pro Bono

To the Editor:

Ann M. Guinn's article, "How Attorneys Underearn," in the August 2012 issue of the *Michigan Bar Journal* identifies many behaviors that may lead to an attorney's underearning, such as irregular billing, failing to market, lack of self-motivation, and undervaluing work. The author also identifies "excessive pro bono" as a possible contributor to underearning. The article addresses serious concerns and offers hope to lawyers facing today's reality of a lack of jobs and

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reduced earnings. However, attorneys who provide true pro bono in line with the State Bar's Voluntary Pro Bono Standard (and not "involuntary" pro bono, sometimes used to describe unpaid bills) realize many economic benefits for themselves and their organizations and improve the profession as a whole. There is a strong "business case for pro bono" that can expand both an attorney's client base and a firm's profit margin and greatly enhance a lawyer's legal skills.

For large law firms, *American Lawyer* magazine ranked the pro bono efforts of the nation's major law firms based on the average number of hours per lawyer providing pro bono services. Of the 10 firms ranked highest on *American Lawyer's* list, all reported very healthy profits per partner. Additionally, law firms increasingly find that young and talented recruits are attracted to robust pro bono opportunities that offer a welcome change of pace from the demands of corporate and business practice. A successful pro bono experience causes lawyers to feel they have made a positive difference in the life of another person, thereby increasing the quality of their own lives.

For individual attorneys, programs that refer pro bono cases often provide free, high-quality substantive law training in ex-

change for handling a pro bono case appropriate to the lawyer's interest, and the attorneys build skills and gain practical experience. Pro bono offers the opportunity to work with a variety of clients one may otherwise not encounter, thereby enhancing communication skills and building confidence for inexperienced lawyers. Attorneys in private practice often find that pro bono service leads to paying clients and is an important part of a successful client development plan. Many attorneys realize that providing pro bono legal services enhances their reputation within their firm, the profession, and their community.

While I respect the gravity of the issues addressed in "How Attorneys Underearn," I wanted to make sure the "business case for pro bono" was not left out of the conversation. In fact, I would argue that an attorney is more likely to realize earning success and find personal satisfaction in the practice by following the State Bar's Voluntary Pro Bono Standard of annually taking three cases, providing 30 hours of service, or donating \$300 (\$500 for those whose income allows) to a legal aid program or the Access to Justice Fund.

Robert G. Mathis Jr.
SBM Pro Bono Service Counsel