

A Lawyer Helps...



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"You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give."

—Winston Churchill

Those who have read the President's Page in the past know that I am far from the first State Bar president to focus a column on what lawyers can give and what they do give. We are all drawn to this topic because one of the most gratifying aspects of being State Bar president is leading a profession whose highest traditions include helping those in need.

The stories that get media attention often focus on the negatives about a few lawyers. Yet I know from my long career as a lawyer and from the opportunity I have had to work with other bar leaders that the opposite is closer to reality. Lawyers do many good works every day in every community. Because those deeds are often invisible, the State Bar hopes to shine a light on those efforts through a campaign entitled "A Lawyer Helps."

While there are innumerable ways that lawyers help the justice system and their neighbors, the legal profession has prioritized providing pro bono legal services and financial donations to support nonprofit legal aid services through the State Bar's Voluntary Pro Bono Standard.¹ The Standard is based on Rule 6.1 of the Michigan Rules of Professional Conduct. The Comment to MRPC 6.1 provides in part that "every lawyer, regardless of professional prominence or professional workload, should find time to participate in or otherwise support the provision of legal services to the disadvantaged." I want to thank all Michigan lawyers who helped provide more than 42,000 hours of free pro bono legal services in Michigan last year and for helping the Access to Justice Fund exceed more than \$8.5 million in

gifts and pledges to date for civil legal aid to persons of limited means.

Legal aid offices handle urgent and critical cases that often result in keeping families safe, preserving their homes from illegal evictions or foreclosures, maintaining economic stability, and obtaining support for children. There are nearly 1.5 million low-income families eligible for free legal aid in Michigan because their annual income is under 125 percent of the federal poverty standard, i.e., \$22,000 annually for

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a family of three. Despite the tremendous effort of these programs and the pro bono volunteers who assist them, the need remains great.

So the State Bar is working with our partners—the Michigan State Bar Foundation and Michigan's civil legal aid organizations—on the next phase of the Access to Justice Campaign. Its goals are to build a statewide endowment to generate funds to sustain civil legal aid services into the future and to support local legal aid programs in raising operating and endowment dollars through the ATJ Fund. We will try to achieve these goals in ways that make giving easier and provide more recognition to donors, including firms that lead the way through meeting and exceeding the voluntary stan-

dard both for financial donations and pro bono service.

We will be asking all lawyers and law firms to continue supporting this effort. The end of the calendar/tax year is a wonderful time to consider a gift of the \$300 annual minimum pro bono amount or more to get the benefits of federal tax deductions or, for endowment gifts, a Michigan tax credit. Respond generously when your local legal aid program sends you a year-end appeal; you can also visit www.atjfund.org for information about ways to give, potential tax benefits, and a list of ATJ Fund eligible programs.

While there remains much to be done, I am proud of all that lawyers have given to support access to justice for persons of limited means through pro bono services and donations. However, in my travels around the state, I have observed that this legal work is only a part of what lawyers do to contribute to their communities. Whether it is the young lawyers organizing in force to help build a Habitat house, a senior lawyer delivering meals on wheels, law students going to Louisiana on their break to help hurricane victims, bar associations helping teach law-related classes to students—there are myriad ways that lawyers are among the most civic-minded citizens anywhere. It is a goal of the State Bar and a personal goal of mine that we recognize and celebrate these services.

The point of the "A Lawyer Helps" campaign is to help the public connect the many lawyer-volunteers in their communities with the legal profession itself, to directly counteract the negative information about lawyers with real-life, on-the-ground examples of selfless giving. We also believe that the campaign will help lawyers find opportunities to volunteer and will help those communities appreciate the unique

and expansive charitable role that lawyers play in every area of the state.

The campaign appropriately uses a heart logo as a symbol, which is displayed on gear like tee shirts, baseball caps, and buttons that will help spread the message. Wearing these items reminds us all of the good works that lawyers do in pro bono, in the ATJ Fund, and in their communities. On the basis of what I have seen of the generosity and commitment of Michigan lawyers, I am confident that the "A Lawyer Helps" logo will soon be a pervasive and effective symbol of the best of our profession. There are countless stories that illustrate this, like the following example:

An unsuspecting 87-year-old used her modest income to pay a remodeling contractor to repair the porch on her long-time home. After doing only some of the work, the contractor disappeared with the woman's money and never returned. A legal aid agency asked a local pro bono program to recruit a pro bono lawyer to help her. The lawyer asked two other lawyers to help with this case and all three tried in many ways to track down the contractor. When they could not find the contractor, they decided to take matters into their own hands and together gathered up their tools and completed the porch repair themselves. The elderly woman was overjoyed.

I am honored to be in a profession that helps those in need and that has such heart. My thanks go out to every Michigan lawyer who so often shows that "A Lawyer Helps." ■

I acknowledge the contributions to this article by Janet Welch, executive director of the State Bar of Michigan, and Linda Rexer, executive director of the Michigan State Bar Foundation.

FOOTNOTE

1. The Voluntary Standard, adopted in 1990, asks every lawyer to accept three pro bono cases, provide 30 hours of pro bono services, or donate \$300 to support legal services programs' efforts to provide access to the court system to low-income persons. The Bar supported modifications to this Standard in 2003, which would expand the areas of permissible pro bono service and increase the recommended donation to \$500. These recommendations are pending before the Supreme Court.