

## Paid Lawyers Help Too

### To the Editor:

I was initially heartened to read the articles in the May 2009 issue around the theme “A Lawyer Helps.” Finally, I thought, recognition that ours is a helping profession, accompanied by a great slogan and logo. However, as I read on, it was clear that a lawyer is considered to be helping only if he or she engages in pro bono activity. Apparently, if we earn a living, we help no one.

Law is, at heart, a helping profession. We take problems off our clients’ shoulders and put them on our own backs. We help them with matters that are deeply personal—criminal, family, work—or we help businesses stay viable. And sometimes we defend the Constitution while we’re at it. Law is a helping profession as much as being a doctor, firefighter, police officer, or myriad others, and it remains so even when we are paid to do it.

I have worked many years in legal aid, performing pro bono work, serving on non-

profit boards, and otherwise giving back to my community. I laud attorneys who do the same and applaud the State Bar for encouraging such work. But why didn’t you recognize that our daily work is also “helping”? It’s an insult to imply otherwise. You missed a real opportunity to bust stereotypes and educate the public about what we do day in and day out for the people who hire us and rely on us: our clients. They’re also the ones we should really thank for paying us to make a living so that we can afford the opportunity to perform pro bono services.

**Nicholas Roumel**

**Ann Arbor**

### *Response from the State Bar of Michigan*

The State Bar has long promoted the basic proposition that the practice of law is a helping profession. The new “A Lawyer Helps” program complements, and does not replace, the longstanding efforts of the State Bar to educate the public about the value

of lawyers. These include well-established efforts to eradicate the unauthorized practice of law and referral programs to help clients find lawyers to help them. The concern that Mr. Roumel expresses—that the value of the contributions of working lawyers needs to be better understood—is one that the State Bar takes to heart. In fact, the very name and graphic design that we have chosen for the new program, “A Lawyer Helps,” is designed to underscore the basic point that Mr. Roumel makes—that the practice of law is, at heart, a helping profession.

However, the State Bar must also safeguard the public-service traditions of our profession, including the State Bar Voluntary Pro Bono Standard, which recognizes that lawyers should share their legal skills to assist those in need. It is always incumbent on us to promote and strengthen this legacy, and doing so does not undermine the value of legal work for those who are able to hire attorneys. In fact, by acknowledging pro bono and other public service, “A Lawyer Helps” counteracts the widespread caricature of lawyers as greedy tradesmen with appealing, and factual, evidence to the contrary.

It is our hope that greater awareness of the unique role that lawyers have in assuring access to justice for all can also help encourage the public to turn to lawyers for help with their legal needs, rather than to the many pernicious sources of false “help” now proliferating on the Internet.

**Janet K. Welch**

**Executive Director,  
State Bar of Michigan**

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