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To: Pro Bono Initiative

From: Robert Mathis, Pro Bono Service Counsel
Eisha Vatsal, Law Clerk Intern

Date: November 18, 2015

Re: Pro Bono Month 2015 Final Report

Background

- **History of Pro Bono Month**

For the seventh year in a row, the State Bar of Michigan (SBM) Pro Bono Initiative (PBI) sponsored Pro Bono Month in conjunction with the American Bar Association's (ABA) Pro Bono Week celebration, a national recognition of pro bono activities. In 2005, Pro Bono Week was first celebrated in Chicago and has since become an annual occasion, celebrated across the United States. In 2009, in an effort to facilitate an increased focus on a wide array of pro bono activities, the decision was made by the PBI to extend Michigan's Pro Bono Week into Pro Bono Month. The pro bono celebration is an opportunity to recruit more pro bono volunteers, increase legal services to the poor, mobilize community support for pro bono, foster collaborative relationships, and recognize and publicize the pro bono efforts of Michigan's lawyers.

- **Need for Pro Bono**

Pro Bono Month highlights the need for pro bono, and pro bono is needed more now than ever because at no time in recent memory has the divide been wider between the need for legal services and their availability. Michigan's dire economy has increased the need for legal help. From 2000 to 2013, Michigan's poverty population eligible for free legal aid increased 53 percent. About 25 percent of Michigan's children under the age of 18 live in poverty. Michigan also remains among the states with the highest number of foreclosures and highest unemployment rate.

Making matters even worse, Michigan's nonprofit legal aid programs suffered about a 20 percent cut in funding and related staff reductions from 2010-2012. In 2013, there was one lawyer for about every 281 people in the general population, but only one legal aid lawyer for every 20,837 persons in Michigan living at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. In Michigan, there are nearly 3 million low-income residents who qualify for legal

aid.¹ That is approximately one of every three Michigianians. These low-income residents include:

- retirees on fixed incomes;
- veterans who have been denied benefits;
- survivors of domestic violence;
- neglected children;
- immigrants;
- the working poor;
- persons with disabilities;
- laid-off workers; and
- many others who struggle daily for survival, independence, and dignity.

During Pro Bono Month and throughout the year, the SBM asks its members to give back to their communities by providing pro bono legal services to the poor² as only lawyers are qualified to do. Under the SBM's Voluntary Pro Bono Standard, every year each lawyer is asked to take three cases, donate 30 hours or contribute \$300 (\$500 for those attorneys whose income allows) to support legal aid through the Access to Justice Fund (ATJ).

As the State Bar's Voluntary Pro Bono Standard illustrates, in Michigan, pro bono involves both service and money. Making a donation to the ATJ Fund is a way for lawyers who are not able to provide service to meet the Pro Bono Standard. But many lawyers generously give both service and money, which is wonderful because the need for both is so great these days. Since 1997, the ATJ Fund has raised more than \$14.4 million to support a statewide network of nonprofit legal aid programs.³

In fact, in a recent pro bono report, the SBM found that Michigan lawyers take seriously their obligation to provide significant pro bono legal services and contribute financially to legal aid programs. Michigan attorneys reported doing pro bono for a broad range of reasons including personal satisfaction, assuring access to justice, and connecting with local legal aid programs. Many Michigan attorneys have found that pro bono offers the opportunity to work with a wide variety of clients one may otherwise not encounter, thereby enhancing communication skills and building confidence for inexperienced lawyers. Attorneys in private practice have found that pro bono service leads to paying clients and is an important part of a successful client development plan. Many attorneys have also discovered that providing pro bono legal services enhances their reputation within their firm, within the profession, and within their community. Of the Michigan attorneys that

¹ LSC programs use federal income eligibility limits (125 percent of the federal poverty level) to determine income eligibility, which also includes clients with household incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty levels with certain eligible expenses.

² The PBI defines "poor" as individuals and families with incomes at or below 200 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines and with liquid assets below \$5,000.

³ The Access to Justice Campaign is a partnership of the State Bar of Michigan, the Michigan State Bar Foundation, and Michigan's nonprofit civil legal aid programs to increase resources for civil legal aid for the poor in Michigan.

were surveyed, 66 percent reported doing some pro bono work, 30 percent reported making donations for legal aid programs, and many reported doing both.

Despite the generosity and commitment of Michigan’s pro bono attorneys, more help is needed for those in need of civil legal aid. Michigan’s legal aid programs lack the resources to serve all who need help, and because of insufficient resources must turn away nearly half of all persons who request help, which is why pro bono legal services are so important during Pro Bono Month, and throughout every other month of the year.

- **State Bar of Michigan Planning Process**

The 2015 Pro Bono Month workgroup met frequently to plan and coordinate pro bono events throughout Michigan.

The 2015 Pro Bono Month workgroup included:

- Heidi Naasko, Pro Bono and Diversity Counsel—Dykema
- Kim Paulson, Pro Bono Counsel—Bodman
- Linda Rexer, Executive Director—Michigan State Bar Foundation
- Amy Sankaran, Director of Externship and Pro Bono Programs—University of Michigan Law School
- Justin Sheehan (Workgroup Chair), Statewide Program Manager—Michigan Community Resources
- Candace Crowley, Assistant Executive Director—State Bar of Michigan
- Robert Mathis, Pro Bono Service Counsel—State Bar of Michigan
- Benjamin Ensroth, Law Student Intern—State Bar of Michigan
- Eisha Vatsal, Law Clerk Intern

Project Objectives

The goal of the Pro Bono Month workgroup was to have substantial recognition of Pro Bono Month 2015 by the diverse members of Michigan’s legal community. This was done through raising awareness, publicizing and streamlining efforts, and overall statewide collaboration.

Pro Bono Month 2015 was an opportunity for attorneys to take part in events to educate the public and the legal profession about pro bono. To recognize Michigan’s dire economic climate and an even greater need for legal services for the poor, the workgroup determined that the theme for Pro Bono Month 2015 would continue to be “now more than ever—pro bono is the right thing to do.” The workgroup had several objectives for Pro Bono Month 2015, including raising overall awareness of Pro Bono Month and increasing opportunities for members of the legal community to get involved.

To facilitate in the promotion of Pro Bono Month, the SBM encouraged events throughout the Pro Bono Month season, which included the months of August through November. The PBI aggressively publicized Pro Bono Month events on the PBI Pro Bono Month website that were sponsored by organizations all across Michigan, including, but not limited to, legal services organizations, bar associations, law schools, law firms, and solo practitioners.

Key Developments

1. There were more than 60 Pro Bono Month 2015 events held throughout Michigan during the Pro Bono Month 2015 season. Additional Pro Bono Month event information can be viewed by visiting the SBM Pro Bono Month website.⁴
2. The 2015 John W. Cummiskey Award, established in the name of John W. Cummiskey of Grand Rapids, a leading advocate and activist in the cause of making legal services available to all, without regard to economic status, was presented to Paul Scheidemantel of Clark Hill at the SBM Annual Awards Banquet to recognize Paul's significant pro bono contributions.
3. To highlight the exceptional pro bono efforts of attorneys throughout the state, the PBI, in conjunction with the workgroup, published many [A Lawyer Helps](#) stories throughout the Pro Bono Month season.
4. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed a proclamation declaring October 2015 as Pro Bono Month.

Other Events During the Pro Bono Month 2015 Season

Events held throughout Michigan in recognition of Pro Bono Month 2015 included:

September

- 9/1–11/24 Common Ground Legal Clinic
- 9/3–11/23 PPO Affidavit Assistance Project
- 15 Wine & Cheese Reception Honoring USPTO Director Christal Sheppard
- 16 Patent Pro Bono Project Information Session
- 18 Michigan Legal Help Law Student Pro Bono Information Session
- 19 University of Michigan Law School Pro Bono Launch Lunch
- 20 Michigan Legal Help Law Student Pro Bono Information Session
- 21 Steven Scudder Talk at University of Michigan Law School
- 23 Oakland County Bar Association Free Legal Aid Clinic-Ferndale
Michigan Legal Help Law Student Pro Bono Information Session

⁴ <http://www.michbar.org/probono.cfm>

- 24 Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund and Dykema Name Change Project
- 9/28–10/2 2015 Michigan Poverty Law Program Roadshow
- 28-30 SBM UP Tour—Lunch with Chippewa County Bar Association
SBM UP Tour—Reception with Delta County Bar Association
SBM UP Tour—Lunch with Dickinson County and Iron County Bar Associations
SBM UP Tour—Cocktails and Dinner with Gogebic-Ontonagon Bar Association
SBM UP Tour—Lunch with Copper County Bar Association
SBM UP Tour—Reception with Marquette County Bar Association
- 29 Michigan Legal Help Law Student Pro Bono Information Session
- 30 2015 University of Detroit Mercy Law Mentor Jet Program
- October**
- 1 Official Pro Bono Month 2015 Kick-off
- 1 Oakland County Bar Association Senior Law Day
- 10/1–29 Eviction Diversion Program
- 1 MSU Chance at Childhood Self-Help Center
- 7 State Bar of Michigan Awards Banquet
- 7–9 Annual Meeting—Justice Initiatives Book with A Lawyer Helps Information
- 9 MSU Chance at Childhood Self-Help Center
- 14 Oakland County Pro Bono Breakfast
MSU Chance at Childhood Self-Help Center
Jackson Office Legal Services of South Central Michigan Open House
- 15 Lansing Legal Services of South Central Michigan Open House
- 20 Oakland County Bar Association Free Legal Aid Mini-Clinic
- 22 MSU Chance at Childhood Self-Help Center
Battle Creek Legal Services of South Central Michigan Open House
Ask a Lawyer Event
Floyd Skinner Bar Association 2015 Scholarship Reception

- John N. Vlachos Award
- 23 Naturalization Workshop
Pro Bono Family Law Training
- 26 Annual Pro Bono Appreciation Luncheon and Awards
- 27 Legal Advice Clinic
Detroit Pro Bono Happy Hour
- 28 7th Annual Kelley Lecture and 6th Annual Justice Initiatives Summit
- 29 Michael S. Barnes Award
Michigan Advocacy Program 50th Anniversary Celebration
Ask the Lawyer Night at the Library
- 30 MSU Chance at Childhood Self-Help Center
Conviction Set-Aside Clinic

November

- 2 Tax Court Calendar Call
- 4 MSU Chance at Childhood Self-Help Center
- 6 West Michigan Legal Aid Session
- 12 2015 Pro Bono Recognition
Monroe Legal Services of South Central Michigan Open House
MSU Chance at Childhood Self-Help Center
Oakland County Bar Association—Novemberfest

Observations

This was the seventh year the Pro Bono Initiative undertook the task of planning Pro Bono Month. Pro Bono Month continues to grow, and 2015 was the most successful Pro Bono Month in terms of events planned and posted on the State Bar’s Pro Bono Month website, including more than 60 events throughout Michigan. Moving forward, pro bono events held in October, as well as all other months of the year, will be posted to the Pro Bono Month website, highlighting the need for pro bono service throughout the year to help ensure access to justice to Michigan’s low-income residents.

It is suggested that the PBI continue to promote Pro Bono Month. As more members of Michigan’s legal community become aware of Pro Bono Month, Pro Bono Month season will continue to be increasingly successful in recruiting more pro bono volunteers to provide legal services to Michigan’s poor.

“Access to justice is a dream. We must make it a reality.”

—John W. Cumiskey