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To: Pro Bono Initiative  
From: Robert Mathis  
Date: November 12, 2012  
Re: Pro Bono Month 2012 Final Report

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## Background

- **History of Pro Bono Month**

For the fourth 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 month-long 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; 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 its availability. Making matters even worse, federal funding for legal services was cut 15 percent in 2012, after being cut 4 percent in 2011.<sup>1</sup> In Michigan, there are nearly 3 million low-income residents who qualify for legal aid.<sup>2</sup> That's approximately one of every three Michiganians. These low-income families include:

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

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<sup>1</sup> Legal Services Corporation, [www.LSC.gov](http://www.LSC.gov).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 poor<sup>3</sup> 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 \$11 million to support a statewide network of nonprofit legal aid programs<sup>4</sup>.

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 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 to help 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 2012 Pro Bono Month workgroup met frequently to plan and coordinate pro bono events throughout Michigan.

The 2012 Pro Bono Month workgroup included:

- Michael Bryce, Clinical Director and Professor—University of Detroit Mercy School of Law
- Heidi Naasko, Pro Bono and Diversity Counsel—Dykema
- John Nussbaumer, Associate Dean for the Auburn Hills Campus—Thomas M. Cooley Law School
- Linda Rexer, Executive Director—Michigan State Bar Foundation

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

- Amy Sankaran, Director of Externship and Pro Bono Programs—University of Michigan Law School
- Justin Sheehan, Statewide Program Manager—Michigan Community Resources
- Candace Crowley, Director of External Development—State Bar of Michigan
- Robert Mathis, Pro Bono Service Counsel—State Bar of Michigan

## Project Objectives

The goal of the Pro Bono Month workgroup was to have substantial recognition of Pro Bono Month 2012 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 2012 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 economical climate and an even greater need for legal services for the poor, the workgroup determined that the theme for Pro Bono Month 2012 would continue to be “now more than ever—pro bono is more than just the right thing to do.” The workgroup had several objectives for Pro Bono Month 2012, including raising overall awareness of October as 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 month of October. 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. The more than forty 2012 Pro Bono Month events held throughout Michigan can be viewed by visiting the SBM Pro Bono Month website.<sup>5</sup>

## Key Developments

1. In addition to the promotion of Pro Bono Month 2012 events planned by other organizations, the PBI played a pivotal role in the planning and execution of the 2012 Grand Rapids Pro Bono Fair, which included SBM President Bruce Courtade as a special guest speaker. The primary purpose of the Pro Bono Fair was to give West Michigan attorneys an opportunity to check out and connect with legal services organizations in their community and to explore volunteer opportunities. The 2012 Pro Bono Fair was graciously sponsored by Rhoades McKee, Miller Johnson, and Community Legal Services of Western Michigan. The event was hosted by Thomas M. Cooley Law School’s Grand Rapids Campus.

At the 2012 Grand Rapids Pro Bono Fair, there were a total of 63 participants, which included 28 Michigan licensed attorneys and 35 law students and recent law graduates. The fair featured 20 different organizations that provide free or reduced-fee legal services. Prior to the Pro Bono Fair, all participating organizations completed an application process to ensure compliance with State Bar and Michigan State Bar Foundation pro bono policies and guidelines. The attorneys that attended the fair were under no obligation to take a case or to make a time commitment. The Pro Bono Fair was meant to be a chance to network, meet colleagues, and learn about legal services providers that desperately need pro bono attorneys.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.michbar.org/programs/ProBonoEvent.cfm>.

2. The State Bar's Domestic Violence Committee, in partnership with the PBI, provided an intensive in-person training that covered initial client interviews, substantive legal issues, pleadings, and pretrial and trial practices as they relate to family law cases with domestic violence components. The training was held on Friday, Oct. 26, 2012. The in-person training was hosted by the Auburn Hills Campus of Thomas M. Cooley Law School, with a simultaneous broadcast to Cooley's other Michigan campuses in Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids, and Lansing.

The training was free of charge for the 53 participants, including 42 Michigan licensed attorneys and 11 law students and recent law graduates that plan to take the Michigan bar exam within the next year. Currently licensed attorneys that attended the training have all committed to accepting a pro bono family law case from a legal services provider within six months of the training.

3. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed a proclamation declaring October 2012 as Pro Bono Month.

## **Other Pro Bono Month 2012 Events**

Other events held throughout Michigan in recognition of Pro Bono Month 2012 included:

1. Elder Law of Michigan and attorneys from Ford Motor Company and LeClair Ryan helped low-income seniors with their estate planning needs.
2. Migrant Legal Aid of Grand Rapids assisted immigrant youth with Deferred Action and Employment Authorization.
3. Local attorneys, assisted by Thomas M. Cooley Law School law students, provided renters at Steepletown Neighborhood Services with answers to their legal questions, and helped them learn about options and understand possible outcomes for their situation.
4. At Thomas M. Cooley Law School's Ann Arbor, Auburn Hills, Grand Rapids, and Lansing campuses, students, faculty, staff, and members of the bar were invited to take a pledge to make pro bono an important part of their lives as future and practicing attorneys. Michigan Supreme Court Justice Michael Cavanagh, the Honorable Margaret Bakker, and other distinguished judges spoke on the importance of pro bono work and administered the pledge.
5. The Michigan State University College of Law Housing Clinic partnered with the Department of Health Services, Legal Services of South Central Michigan, the Capital Area Community Services Group, and the 55th District Court to begin Ingham County's first Eviction Diversion Pilot Program. Housing clinicians helped indigent tenants in Ingham County avoid eviction and homelessness by assessing each and every eviction proceeding at the 55th District Court, directing need-based tenants to DHS and CACS, and referring tenants with affirmative legal defenses to Legal Services of South Central Michigan or retained them as clients of the MSU Housing Clinic.

6. DeGage Ministries offered help to the homeless and disadvantaged in the Grand Rapids area. Pro bono legal services were offered on the first, third, and fourth Thursdays of October.
7. The Michigan State University College of Law Small Business and Nonprofit Clinic provided information to international students interested in starting a business in the U.S. Participants met with resident clinicians and signed up for free services as a project participant.
8. University of Detroit Mercy School of Law assisted immigrant youth with Deferred Action and Employment Authorization.
9. Legal Aid of Western Michigan hosted a “One Billable Hour Luncheon.”
10. Mel Trotter Ministries, a nonprofit organization that exists to help the hungry, homeless and hurting in the Greater Grand Rapids area, coordinated the provision of pro bono legal services on the second and fourth Wednesdays of October.
11. A workshop was conducted by Associate Dean Nelson Miller at Cooley's Grand Rapids Campus. Dean Miller discussed his latest book, *Building Your Practice with Pro Bono*, and talked about the importance of pro bono work in the community, and how you can make contacts and build your client base by first volunteering your time and expertise.
12. The Family Law Assistance Project of Lakeshore Legal Aid, Thomas M. Cooley Law School, and Common Ground Legal Services held a luncheon celebration to honor the Honorable Edward Sosnick.
13. Thomas Cooley Law School's Service to Soldiers: Legal Assistance Referral Program teamed up with Michigan National Guard JAG officers to offer a variety of legal services to Guardsmen and women and their families. Volunteer attorneys and students handled consultations on family law, creditor/debtor, federal benefits, criminal law, and other issues. JAG officers and Cooley students prepared wills and POAs for those members wanting documents created.
14. Michigan Community Resources held a luncheon entitled “Pro Bono & the Transactional Attorney: What Opportunities Exist.”
15. Sponsored by the Saginaw County Bar Association and Legal Services of Eastern Michigan, volunteer attorneys from the Saginaw County Bar Association provided legal advice to consumers at a local soup kitchen at the Old Town Christian Outreach in Saginaw.
16. The general public was invited to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Tenant Law Project, and the many attorneys, students, and the local organizations that worked together to offer pro bono legal services to the community. Local attorneys, assisted by Cooley law students, offered renters with tenant law issues answers to their legal questions and helped them learn about options and understand possible outcomes for their situation.

17. The State Bar of Michigan's Pro Bono Initiative convened its first meeting of the 2012-2013 Bar year in conjunction with the Justice Initiatives Kick-Off at the State Bar Building in Lansing.
18. The Oakland County Bar Association conducted Legal Aid Mini Clinics at the Southfield, Davisburg, and Ferndale Public Libraries throughout the month of October.
19. Legal Services of Eastern Michigan conducted Senior Legal Advice Clinics at the Elinor Frank Senior Center in Saginaw.
20. The MSU Housing Clinic offered a House Law Q & A at the Mason Library.
21. Immigration Legal Services of Grand Rapids assisted immigrant youth with the Deferred Action and Employment Authorization.
22. The Saginaw County Bar Association held a luncheon for all Saginaw County pro bono attorneys to hear invited speaker Marla Mitchell-Cichon, co- director of the Innocence Project at Cooley Law School. In addition, pro bono service awards were presented, including the coveted Pro Bono Attorney of the Year award.
23. Legal Services of Eastern Michigan held “Ask a Lawyer Night at the Library” at the Butman-Fish Library in Saginaw.
24. Legal Aid and Defender held the Laddys at the A. Albert Taubman Center for Design Services at the College for Creative Studies. The ceremony honored attorneys, law firms, and corporate legal departments for exceptional volunteer service representing LAD clients through its Private Attorney Involvement Program.
25. The University of Detroit Mercy School of Law sponsored the First Annual Veterans’ Legal Assistance Conference.
26. Legal Services of Eastern Michigan coordinated a legal clinic at the East Side Soup Kitchen in Saginaw.
27. Thomas M. Cooley Law School’s Service to Soldiers Program held the “Nuances of Representing Military Clients” seminar at Fort Custer in Augusta.

## Observations

This was the fourth year the Pro Bono Initiative undertook the task of planning Pro Bono Month. Pro Bono Month continues to grow, and 2012 was the most successful Pro Bono Month in terms of events planned and posted on the State Bar’s Pro Bono Month website, which included more than 40 events throughout Michigan. Moving forward, pro bono events held 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 October as Pro Bono Month, Pro Bono Month 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***