

CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

Personal View: The business case for pro bono

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Cleveland stands as a pioneer in communitywide charitable giving.

The nation's first community foundation, the Cleveland Foundation, was established in 1914 by Frederick Goff, a contemporary of John D. Rockefeller. Last year, the United Way marked a centennial anniversary. It traces its roots to the Community Chest fundraising drives, which began raising money for health and social services in Cleveland in 1913.

Our region also boasts an impressive legacy in the legal arena: specifically, in ensuring that those who cannot afford a lawyer, and there are many, have access to justice.

Unlike criminal cases, where the accused are constitutionally entitled to counsel, there is no right to counsel in the United States in civil matters. People with low or no income, who have issues that may relate to housing, child custody, domestic relations or consumer law, need the help of a zealous advocate on their behalf.

Without proper legal representation, hundreds of thousands of citizens in this region would not enjoy the most basic human rights: shelter, safety and health care.

Our community is blessed to have the nationally recognized Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, which has provided nearly 110 years of service to the community. Every year, Legal Aid and its capable full-time staff processes 17,000 applications for help from people who are low-income and have cases of legal merit. Of those, Legal Aid only has the resources to help 43% of those people. Consequently, the important role of the pro bono (volunteer) lawyer cannot be overstated.

Thousands of Northeast Ohio attorneys respond to the justice gap by donating their professional services to those in need. Lawyers recognize, more than most, that to have a true democracy all segments of our society must have a place at the table of justice.

The American Bar Association nationally recognizes volunteer attorneys with its annual "Pro Bono Week" each October. Here in Northeast Ohio, we just finished the celebration — and used the opportunity to recognize attorneys with a variety of events to thank them for their pro bono service — of service that may profoundly change and improve the life of someone in our community.

Over the years, our community and the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland have benefited from the volunteer efforts

of locally based attorneys from big firms and small, sole practitioners and government lawyers. One particular group of lawyers — in-house attorneys, who work as general counsel in corporations and other enterprises — have adopted Legal Aid as their “pet project.” Their professional group, the Northeast Ohio Association of Corporate Counsel (NEOACC), generously organizes clinics for Legal Aid four times a year to do their part to ensure appropriate legal representation in the civil justice system to those in need.

These attorneys serve as shining examples of the business community stepping up to assist those who may otherwise be denied civil justice. As John D. Moran, the general counsel of GrafTech International and a member of NEOACC, stated, “By participating in the Legal Aid clinics the corporate counsel do get out of their comfort zone. But it helps us get more grounded and connected to the community, to what's really happening at the street level.”

Pro bono representation is not just about building a company's philanthropic profile. The business community also benefits with unintended gains from their involvement.

It is no secret that social issues — from poverty to health care — are increasingly impinging on corporate agendas.

Volunteer attorneys often reflect that by helping their less-fortunate fellow citizens, they are better able to navigate life's hurdles and help their employers anticipate and manage problems.

Attorneys tell us that through their pro bono work and engaging with judges and nonprofit board members they have enjoyed experiences that are otherwise not in their ordinary course of business. Ultimately, lawyers find the experience helps them become better advocates and corporate problem-solvers.

Consumer sentiment, media coverage and government regulatory pressures are increasingly driving business in the direction of more sustainable practices, paying attention not only to the financial bottom line, but also the environment and the health of the local community.

Contributing pro bono legal services adds value to the vibrancy of a corporation's community, which in turn drives greater profitability. A corporate culture that includes volunteerism can be a form of enlightened organizational self-interest.

The recent national observation of Pro Bono Week causes us to pause and reflect on the benefits of volunteerism and public service throughout the year.

Lawyers protect people, defend the poor and serve as advocates for those who have no voice. With National Pro Bono Week now behind us, please take time to reflect on these principles and carry forward Cleveland's long-standing tradition of philanthropy by helping those in need.

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