

Pro Bono Offers Career Hope in Bleak Legal Market

By Victoria (Tory) Messina, Esq.

The news about law jobs is not good these days. The legal job market recently hit a three year low, law firms are dissolving or laying off lawyers, and potential summer associates are finding that job offers are being rescinded before they can accept them. Even for those with job offers in hand or for current junior associates, the job market can seem precarious and daunting. For recent law graduates without jobs the picture is bleak. Besides giving in to despair or waiting for an economic turnaround, there is something that aspiring lawyers and new lawyers can do to improve their chances of getting and keeping a job: pro bono.

Pro bono work is not just about being a do-gooder, gaining legal skills or getting free CLE; it's about becoming a true participant in the legal profession. Volunteering your time and legal expertise pro bono will allow you to see "as a lawyer" how the justice system works (or doesn't), how people interact with the law in their daily lives, from starting a business to trying not to get evicted, and how lawyers make a difference every day. And since you will be becoming a "real" lawyer through your pro bono work, you will gain the kind of experience that you want to be able to present to employers.

"Pro bono is an important part of professional development, as pro bono embraces real case work and legal training, which play key roles in developing one as an attorney," said Marcia Levy, Special Counsel for Pro Bono and Professional Development at [Sullivan & Cromwell](#). "Pro bono and public services are essential to developing professionally."

She added, "In acknowledging the skill development that pro bono can provide, we never lose site of the main focus, which is people who cannot afford legal help or whose interests are underrepresented. When lawyers work with clients who have these needs, they also find that they develop a commitment to pro bono work throughout their career."

For law students, pro bono may be the first opportunity to perform legal work, while providing services essential to legal service organizations. "Pro bono and access to justice are at the core of what it means to be a lawyer," says Susan Feathers, Executive Director for the [Levin Center for Public Service](#). "Through law-related service, law students gain invaluable legal skills, participate in the practice of law, and are inspired to commit to pro bono and public service for life. Increasing collaborations among law students, public interest lawyers, and the private bar are absolutely critical in a time of increasing need and decreasing resources."

Your experiences presenting before a judge, developing a legal theory, drafting documents and examining witnesses can also help to give you an edge over other job candidates or help you in your current job.

"Pro bono work can help you maintain your billable hours to help keep your job while also providing opportunities to gain or improve your legal skills if you are thinking of making a move in the future," says Maricar Tinio, Director of well-known recruiting agency [Lateral Link](#). "Pro bono is essential for junior associates to access the foundational skills of the legal practice by gaining hands-on experience."

There are a number of ways to get involved in pro bono work:

(1) For those at law schools and firms with structured pro bono programs, talk to your pro bono coordinator. Pro bono coordinators can assist you in finding volunteer opportunities that will help you develop into a skilled lawyer for whichever type of law you want to practice.

(2) Contact your local or state bar association. Most bar associations have pro bono programs addressing the legal needs of their local communities with the help of local pro bono attorneys.

(3) Go online. You can start with the Volunteer Opportunities Guide at www.probono.net/volunteer. Just enter your location and what kind of case you would like to volunteer on and you can connect with organizations that need your help.

[Probono.net](http://www.probono.net) can also help you find free CLE trainings, news articles, specific cases seeking pro bono counsel, and a wealth of pro bono training manuals, sample briefs and pleadings, and other forms to support your pro bono work.

For those who think it is cynical or self-serving to view pro bono as a way to get a job, there is nothing cynical about the experience of connecting to a client and serving the overwhelming need for legal help for people who cannot afford an attorney. The clients you represent are real, the attorney relationships you develop in the process are real, and these experiences stay with you even after the case is over. And there is nothing cynical about being an attorney with a dream job who fulfills the proudest tradition in our profession: pro bono.

Tory Messina is New York Program Coordinator at Pro Bono Net. Prior to joining Pro Bono Net, Tory worked as an Associate at Fried Frank, where she took on both death penalty and asylum pro bono matters. Tory received her J.D. from University of Pennsylvania Law School, where she was involved in the Penn Law Immigration Project, taught Street Law at the Juvenile Detention Center and was on the Board of the Penn Law Chapter of ACS. She can be reached at tmessina@probono.net.