



The Federal Government Pro Bono Program

In April 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act into law. At the bill signing ceremony, the President said, “We need your service right now, at this moment in history. I’m not going to tell you what your role should be; that is for you to discover. But I am asking you to stand up and play your part.”

Since 1996, the Federal Government Pro Bono Program, directed by the Department of Justice, has worked tirelessly to spread the spirit of public service across the government and throughout our country. We are honored to receive the American Bar Association’s Pro Bono Publico Award in recognition of our efforts.

The Federal Government Pro Bono Program was launched by an executive order of President Bill Clinton in 1996. Prior to this time, attorneys who wished to pursue pro bono work outside of their working hours were largely on their own. President Clinton directed federal agencies to encourage their attorneys to engage in pro bono work and instructed the U.S. Department of Justice to coordinate this effort. The Justice Department enthusiastically followed the President’s directive by creating the first federal agency pro bono program and convened a committee of federal agencies to work on the issue. Today, that committee, the Interagency Pro Bono Working Group, has grown to include 36 participating agencies, all of which work together to provide thousands of hours of volunteer legal services to Americans in need of assistance.

Owed to the concentration of participating federal employees in our nation’s Capital, the Pro Bono Program has become a significant contributor to the residents of the District of Columbia. Through ongoing relationships with local legal services providers such as the DC Bar Pro Bono Program, the Legal Aid Society, and the Neighborhood Legal Services Program, the program has recruited attorneys to perform direct representation, mediation, transactional work, and brief advice to the low-income residents of the Capital region. Our attorneys provide services in many areas of law, including family law, domestic violence, landlord-tenant, consumer law, personal injury and more.

Modeled on the successful efforts in Washington, DC, the program expanded to Chicago in 2008. Working with a dedicated group of federal attorneys in that city, the program developed relationships with several legal services organizations, including the Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Chicago Volunteer Legal Services Foundation and the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, and has begun to recruit federal attorneys to volunteer with those organizations. A similar outreach effort has recently been initiated in New York City.

Government attorneys on the federal, state and local levels face unique challenges in their pro bono work. Unlike their private sector counterparts who may receive billable credit and may access the resources of their firm, government attorneys must do pro bono work on their personal time and use their own resources. They also face potential conflicts of interest and must navigate statutory, regulatory and ethical restrictions which limit the kinds of pro bono work they can do and how they can do it. An important mission of the Federal Government Pro Bono Program is to minimize the impact of these limitations and to provide support to federal government attorneys engaged in volunteer work.

The Program’s receipt of the ABA Pro Bono Publico Award is a testament to the efforts of our selfless federal attorneys who not only choose a career of public service, but also contribute their evenings and weekends to those in need of help. The extraordinary men and women who participate in the Pro Bono Program do not seek or expect recognition, but this award indicates that their efforts are appreciated. May their generosity of spirit inspire even more Americans to answer the President’s call to stand up and play their part.