In an era where trials are becoming more and more infrequent, meaningful opportunities for our young lawyers to take a deposition, to argue a dispositive motion before a trial or administrative law judge, or to advocate before a court of appeals have become equally infrequent. And survey after survey of associate satisfaction lists the availability of and support for pro bono opportunities as a key metric of their satisfaction. These are critical reasons why actively engaging your young lawyers in pro bono makes sense right now.

I am fortunate. If I want to work on a pro bono project, I simply send an email to my pro bono partner or her team members and make the request. Or, more likely, they will have emailed me and others seeking our assistance to, for example, help an active-duty service member, a homeless veteran, or an unrepresented minor in a removal proceeding; protect a spouse from domestic violence; or work on impact class action litigation. Every month I have a menu of matters I might choose to work on, or choose to supervise a young lawyer in representation of a pro bono client.

Most lawyers are not as fortunate. They do not have dedicated staff to help open a pro bono matter; clear conflicts; and assist with engagement, billing, and closing matters. They do not have staff experienced in vetting pro bono opportunities. Or staff who understand which organizations in their community or nationwide not only need help but, importantly, also have the ability to both train and supervise volunteer lawyers. This is a critical issue that, by way of example, played out during the late spring and early summer this year when, because of the crisis caused by separating children from their parents at the border, thousands of attorneys expressed a desire to help but did not know whom to contact to provide legal assistance or how they could get trained to help. The hassle of trying to figure all this out without help can be a significant barrier to entry.

So I decided, as part of my year, to work with the Section’s Pro Bono Task Force to create a Section of Litigation portal to help minimize that barrier to entry. The portal would provide, among other things, form agreements, tips on “how to get started,” and a variety of training materials and resource guides. The portal would also have resources that would list contact information for organizations that need your help right now and that have staff who can train and supervise our member firms’ lawyers.

As the first year of the project played out, we decided to focus our attention on the representation of immigrant children. Not just immigrant children who have been separated from their parents in detention, but immigrant children who are facing a broad spectrum of critical issues. Along with the Section’s Children’s Rights Litigation Committee, the task force and the staff of the Section created a landing page for the portal (www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/initiatives/pro-bono-for-immigrant-children.html).

Featured on the landing page is the following plea explaining why you should help:

Immigrant children are some of the most vulnerable members of our communities. Many have experienced significant persecution, trauma, or abuse in their home countries or on their journeys to the US, only to encounter a hostile immigration system that offers no guidance or counsel. Legal representation helps immigrant children navigate our complicated immigration system and significantly increases their chances of accessing relief for which they are qualified.

Legal services organizations alone cannot meet the need for representation for immigrant children, so many
organizations run pro bono programs to facilitate the involvement of attorney volunteers. This page is intended to make it easier to learn how to get trained, connect with these organizations, and represent an immigrant child who needs your help. You don’t need any previous experience in this area to volunteer with these organizations and make a major difference in the life of a child.

Also on the landing page, you will find materials to help you get started, including sample engagement, translation, and disengagement agreements. There are links to training materials, tips, and other resources focused on the representation of children generally and immigrant and non-English-speaking clients in particular. Importantly, the landing page also includes a section called “Hot Topics,” which, at the outset, will focus on “family separation and detention” and provide links to resources and organizations to contact.

Organizations that need your help or your firm’s help right now are listed by state (and the District of Columbia), with links and contact information for each organization, on the Organization Listing by State page (www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/initiatives/pro-bono-for-immigrant-children/state-listing.html).

Pro bono work is imperative not only to the many underserved and vulnerable clients you may represent but also to the development of a future generation of lawyers.

Constitution in trial and appellate courts throughout the country. Now, more than ever, we must not take our institutions for granted. We must remain vigilant and wary of attempts to weaken the core institutions that are vital to maintaining the separation of powers. And, where necessary, we must take risks and advocate forcefully, however uncomfortable that may be in the moment, to ensure that the rule of law in this country remains our bedrock.

Illustration by Eva Vazquez