

DIALOGUE

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A National Effort to Celebrate Pro Bono

by Sharon Browning, National Celebration of Pro Bono Consultant

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After years of discussion and planning for an annual national celebration of pro bono, the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service chose 2009 as the optimum time to launch this important initiative. At the ABA Annual Meeting last year in New York, plans for the National Pro Bono Celebration were announced; the inaugural Celebration will take place the week of October 25-31, 2009.

The confluence of two circumstances makes this timing ideal: the increasing need for pro bono services as economic conditions worsen, and the unprecedented response of attorneys to meet this need. Although national in breadth, this celebration provides an opportunity for local legal organizations across the country to collaboratively commemorate the vitally important contributions of America's lawyers and to recruit the many additional volunteers required to meet the growing demand. Together, segments of the legal community will showcase local and statewide efforts that demonstrate the great difference that pro bono lawyers make to our nation, our system of justice, our communities and, most of all, to the clients whom they serve.

There has been an enthusiastic response to celebration planning: national, statewide and local partners, including other ABA entities, are working to implement this initiative, developing hundreds of celebration events across the country. Over 200 leaders of the judicial, legal education and bar communities are serving as an Honorary Advisory Committee, and 80 groups have already committed to holding pro bono events during the Celebration week. As momentum increases, it is anticipated that hundreds of events will take place throughout the nation as part of the National Celebration.

The project's website, www.celebrateprobono.org, is critical to providing information, resources and support to those groups interested in hosting events in their communities. The site is also key to the collection and dissemination of information about what groups are doing nationwide. In April, the site will be expanded

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An Event-A-Day The San Francisco Plan

In San Francisco, the Bar Association, Volunteer Lawyers Program, area law schools, corporate law departments, law firms, and the judiciary are collaborating on a week-long celebration which will include:

- Monday:** Strategic Planning Summit
- Tuesday:** Law School Day: events will be hosted by law schools throughout the Bay area
- Wednesday:** Law Firm Day: local volunteer events and national law firm "virtual celebrations".
- Thursday and Friday:** Court-originated community events, an afternoon symposium, and after-hours party.
- Saturday:** Legal Clinic(s)



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Celebrate Pro Bono

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to include a comprehensive list of all celebration activities, including an interactive map linking to details of local events. In addition, the website will also contain information on publicity tips and strategies, sample press releases, public service announcements, proclamations and resolutions, op-eds, talking points, and creative ways to spotlight pro bono during the celebration week.

Events already scheduled are diverse in form, substance, and sponsoring entity. Law schools have planned symposia, bar associations partnering with legal services groups are holding day-long strategic planning gatherings, state bars are coordinating state-wide days of service, and law firms and pro bono referral organizations are collaborating on walk-in and call-in clinics.

In some locales, events are planned for each day of the Celebration week.

In addition to highlighting past successes and providing current services, the National Celebration of Pro Bono also is intended to educate attorneys about the increasing need for their involvement. The past three decades have marked a steady increase in the amount of pro bono work. As reported in the recently published *Supporting Justice II: A Report On The Pro Bono Work of America's Lawyers*,¹ both the overall percentage of pro bono participation and the average number of pro bono hours are on the rise. ABA President H. Thomas Wells recently observed—"We can take pride in the fact that nearly three quarters of us—73 percent—report doing pro bono work for people of limited means."

Yet despite this encouraging news, another recent study, *Documenting The Justice Gap in America: The Current Unmet*

Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans,² revealed that there has been virtually no progress in reducing the percentage of unmet legal needs of the poor in the past 20 years. Fifty percent of eligible individuals seeking legal help are turned away due to lack of resources, and countless others never seek assistance at all, stymied by a lack of information about the legal issues they confront and the help that might be available to them. In commenting on his hopes for the National Pro Bono Celebration week, Mark Schickman, Chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service noted that "...over 80% of the legal needs of America's poor remain unmet. Despite our best efforts, this number will grow, as more Americans than ever slip into poverty. We dedicate this week to the quest for *more* volunteers to help meet that need."

As gatekeepers of justice, attorneys are rising to the challenge of ensuring the fairness and integrity of our system of laws by providing access to legal processes for the poorest Americans. The National Celebration of Pro Bono will enhance and highlight the ongoing efforts by so many in the legal community who work tirelessly throughout the year to meet the legal needs of people who are poor. Most importantly, the celebration will draw even more attorneys into the pro bono community, increasing our profession's ability to meet one of our greatest responsibilities: providing access to justice for Americans living on the social margins. We have much to celebrate. How will you be celebrating the work of pro bono lawyers in your community that week?

Endnotes

- ¹ The American Bar Association Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service, February, 2009.
- ² The Legal Services Corporation, June 2007.