

Pro Bono Resource Center to launch legal Q&A website

By: Lauren Kirkwood Daily Record Legal Affairs Writer September 22, 2016

As part of a national project under the umbrella of the American Bar Association, the Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland will launch a website Oct. 6 where attorneys will be able to give pro bono, limited scope legal help by answering questions posed by low-income residents.

Maryland is one of about 40 states that have signed on to participate in the “Free Legal Answers” initiative — which PBRC is marketing to volunteer lawyers as “Pro Bono in Your Pajamas” — since its inception in Tennessee in 2010, said Buck Lewis, a shareholder at Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz P.C. in Memphis who led the development of the project.

“They all have the same problem we had, which was way more need than we have the resources to meet,” Lewis said. “I think this is an opportunity to do something to help meet that need at a very low cost.”

By the summer of 2015, a handful of other states had successfully set up platforms similar to Tennessee’s with the help of software developed by Baker Donelson’s IT team, and it seemed like the time to pursue the initiative on a national level, Lewis said. With the support of the ABA and private funding sources, dozens of other states signed on to the project, he said.

Volunteer lawyers in Maryland will be able to access the site at any time to claim unanswered questions, all of which will pertain to civil legal matters, or to respond to queries they’ve already agreed to answer, said Sharon Goldsmith, executive director of the PBRC, the organization responsible for publicizing the state’s site and



The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland’s ‘Pro Bono in Your Pajamas’ will allow lawyers short on time or with a specialized practice to choose to answer whatever questions they’d like posed by low-income residents, Executive Director Sharon Goldsmith says. ‘The idea is to make it not too onerous for attorneys, but also to make sure clients are getting a fairly quick response,’ she says. (File photo)



recruiting lawyers to participate.

3 days to answer

Attorneys are expected to take no more than three days to answer a question once they've claimed it, she said. If the question goes unanswered for much longer, it will go back in the queue to allow another attorney to respond.

"The advantages of this for lawyers who may not have a lot of time or may not feel they have lots of different types of expertise is they can choose whatever question they want — they don't have to take a family law question if that's not their practice area," Goldsmith said. "The idea is to make it not too onerous for attorneys, but also to make sure clients are getting a fairly quick response."

To post a question to the site, clients must have an income level that falls below 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

Malpractice insurance will be provided to volunteer lawyers, who will be able to communicate with clients multiple times if they choose, Goldsmith said. The attorneys are encouraged to direct clients to other legal services programs if they need additional help.

"We're making it clear that attorneys are not allowed to take any of these as cases — the obligation and responsibility stops when they close the question," Goldsmith said. "This is really to try to ensure that people of limited means are getting free help."

Because the volunteers are working on a limited scope basis through a legal services organization, conflict of interest rules are relaxed under the Maryland Lawyer's Rules of Professional Conduct, she added.

Growing awareness

With the launch date approaching, PBRC is seeking attorneys interested in volunteering and will soon begin to actively publicize the site to potential clients through its network of nonprofits, faith-based groups, libraries and other organizations, Goldsmith said.

In Tennessee, volunteer lawyers have answered more than 12,000 legal questions, Lewis said. The site launched with around 75 lawyers on the roster and now has more than 500 registered.

"Public awareness of the tool builds over time — the questions start dribbling in in the beginning, and grow and grow as the community is more widely aware of it," he said.



The site makes pro bono work feasible for many lawyers who would find it difficult to take on full representation of a pro bono client, including government attorneys, disabled lawyers and lawyers stationed out of the country due to military service, Lewis said.

“It’s a good introduction for a lot of lawyers who may never have done pro bono,” he said. “We’ve got people who just like doing good in their pajamas at home; they just love being able to do their pro bono whenever and wherever they have access to the internet.”

Tagged with:

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

LEGAL NEWS

PRO BONO RESOURCE CENTER OF MARYLAND

To purchase a reprint of this article, contact reprints@thedailyrecord.com.

Copyright © 2016 Maryland Daily Record | 200 St. Paul Place, Suite 2480, Baltimore, MD 21202 | (443) 524-8100

