

## Q&A: Sharon Goldsmith on the state of pro bono in Maryland

By: Lauren Kirkwood Daily Record Legal Affairs Writer December 8, 2016

Sharon Goldsmith has served as the executive director of the Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland — the pro bono arm of the Maryland State Bar Association — since the organization was established in 1990. Goldsmith recently shared her thoughts on the state of pro bono work in Maryland, how pro bono efforts have evolved over the years and why even busy lawyers should make time to use their legal skills to give back to the community.



### **What do you say to lawyers who say they have no time in their practice for pro bono work?**

Some of the busiest lawyers are also some of our most dedicated volunteers. People may be surprised to learn that an average clinic session runs two to three hours; and an average pro bono case takes only five to ten hours. As lawyers, we have the unique ability to represent or counsel a client who would not be able to navigate the legal system without a skilled advocate. Others cannot offer that same set of skills nor possess the license to do so.

### **Do you see more lawyers seeking pro bono work this time of year?**

We certainly hear that some lawyers appreciate being reminded each year that they will need to complete their pro bono reporting forms for the Maryland Court of Appeals, and as the year comes to a close, reach out for opportunities to complete their pro bono hours. The holiday season also engenders a giving spirit. However, volunteer lawyers who work through organized legal services organizations are most active when the need for their help is critical and they are requested to participate, whether through a clinic or case referrals.

### **How does doing pro bono work help a lawyer in his or her own practice?**

In so many ways! Invaluable training and experience. Networking. Mentoring. Hands-on “service-learning” in clinic settings. Skill-building. Client development. PBRC offers an extensive array of trainings for those interested in volunteering; in fact, we have known volunteers to establish their own practices based upon what they learned from us (visit [www.probonomd.org](http://www.probonomd.org) for training and service opportunities). Pro bono work enables lawyers to learn necessary skills to be an effective lawyer with a level of independence and responsibility that many lawyers, especially newer ones, may not get through their normal practice. Finally, aside from the profound personal satisfaction of helping someone in true need, clients will occasionally refer friends and family members to lawyers who have helped them through challenging times.

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(File photo)

### **What's the most unusual kind of pro bono work you've come across?**

There is such a wide scope of pro bono work being performed that it is difficult to select the most unusual. Lawyers are engaged in advocating for international human rights, establishing affordable housing, eliminating human trafficking, uniting unaccompanied immigrant children with families, advocating for disability access, organizing community development efforts, engaging in legislative initiatives, representing prisoners on death row, etc. However, on a personal level, I was privileged to be asked to be part of a team attempting to create a pro bono legal services delivery system in Kurdistan.

### **What are the biggest changes or innovations in pro bono work you've seen over the years?**

In Maryland, the singularly focused response to the foreclosure crisis not only galvanized the largest group of volunteer lawyers in our history, but expanded the capacity and sophistication of the legal services programs to serve housing and other needs with unprecedented impact. The Foreclosure Pro Bono Prevention Project, spearheaded by PBRC, broadened relationships and partnerships with stakeholders statewide, so that volunteer lawyers became part of the solution to a problem which government and non-profits alone could not handle.

Mandatory reporting, initiated in 2002, also significantly raised the profile of pro bono. The Court of Appeal's adoption of a local pro bono committee structure brought pro bono to the local, grassroots level. The court's Standing Committee on Pro Bono Legal Services continues to set policies and practices that shape how we deliver services today. Recently funded initiatives have spurred an explosion in the breadth and scope of innovative pro bono offerings as well and, as a result, Maryland stands as a national leader in pro bono.

### **Do you believe Maryland should have a pro bono requirement for lawyers?**

The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland Inc. was founded on the principle that we should, as a profession, be able to voluntarily provide pro bono services in a sufficient and meaningful way without mandating that lawyers participate. People and communities in poverty deserve the same level and quality of legal assistance as paying clients. I, for one, would not want to force a lawyer who may be unskilled and/or uninterested in representing a client to do so. As fervently as I believe in pro bono work, I do not think the entire responsibility for ensuring an equal justice system should be borne by lawyers and the legal services community. This is a fundamental and core value of our American democracy, and should be an integral part of our government's political and financial investment.

#### **SOURCE:**

<http://thedailyrecord.com/2016/12/08/qa-sharon-goldsmith-on-the-state-of-pro-bono-in-maryland/>