

Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut Challenges CBA Attorneys to Connect and Engage with Low Income Clients



By Ashleigh M. Backman

Ashleigh M. Backman is the pro bono attorney manager at Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut.

Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut, Inc. (SLS), in partnership with the American Bar Association's (ABA) National Access to Justice "Free Legal Answers" Initiative, has launched a virtually-based, pro bono legal aid clinic, Connecticut Justice Online Anytime, whose goal is to expand access to civil legal service opportunities for both pro bono attorneys and low income clients.

How it Works

This virtual, brief legal advice clinic was created to eliminate lingering barriers—such as transportation, work scheduling, and family obligations—that prevent low income individuals from gaining access to free legal help and hinder active attorneys from committing their time to a pro bono project. SLS's Connecticut Justice Online Anytime virtual pro bono clinic is simple. Connecticut's low income individuals access the website, ct.freelegalanswers.org, to answer eligibility questions, and if qualified, are allowed to post a civil legal question to a secure messaging system.

Get Involved

Registered pro bono attorneys have the ability to log into the pro bono clinic 24 hours a day—from anywhere, at any time—to select a client's question and then provide a brief legal answer. This pro bono "unbundled legal service," as part of the ABA's "Free Legal Answers" Initiative, allows Connecticut pro bono attorneys to decide (1) when they are able to volunteer, (2) what type of legal issue they feel competent to provide advice about, and (3) how much pro bono work they are able to commit to. Moreover, registered pro bono attorneys receive other benefits from this project, such as access to SLS's online legal education training courses, professional liability insurance coverage through the ABA and SLS, and the ability to record and access

their pro bono hours through the website. SLS's new pro bono program makes it easy and convenient for busy civil practitioners to do pro bono from their own offices, homes, or the airport terminal.

Indeed, by providing pro bono legal advice through this project, SLS is able to connect to more people in need. By answering a legal question for a woman with a housing problem, she is then given hope and empowered to help herself. By helping a family that is falling into greater poverty because of debt collection abuses, they have the practical, useful legal information they need to resolve their issue and stabilize their financial situation. These simple exchanges have a big impact.

Volunteer attorneys, too, are empowered as we apply our hard earned education, knowledge, and experiences to make a difference.

Now, attorneys can make that difference each and every day; one question—and one client—at a time. SLS Executive Director Janice Chiaretto explains, "a virtual legal advice clinic will allow busy Connecticut attorneys and low income people to engage in pro bono services like never before. The use of technology in the service of justice is exciting and necessary if we are to keep pace with the demands for legal aid."

Accept SLS's challenge to connect and engage with our low-income clients by contacting SLS Pro Bono Attorney Manager, Ashleigh Backman at abackman@slsct.org, or visiting the Connecticut Justice Online Anytime program online at ct.freelegalanswers.org to register as a pro bono attorney. **CL**