

Putting Your Pro Bono Foot Forward



By Karen DeMeola

Karen DeMeola is the CBA president-elect and assistant dean of student life at the University of Connecticut School of Law

The beginning of this year marked a new chapter in our nation's history. After the election in November, I spent significant time with people both elated and surprised about the election results. However, there was a collective understanding that things would change. I was inundated with phone calls, e-mails, drop-ins—all asking how we can support each other.

I have received phone calls from people looking for pro bono assistance with worries about being deported, losing their kids, and losing health care. The terror in their voices was palpable. And yet I was reminded the fear is not new. The fear that comes from being a victim of a hate crime, domestic violence, workplace discrimination, or simply from being poor is not new. These ills have plagued our society for years and will likely continue to do so.

Though issues of equality are at the forefront of discourse following the election, we should not forget that these issues have been at the forefront for decades. The Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO), legal services agencies, the judicial branch, law school legal clinics, and many others play a role locally to ensure that those with legal needs have access to justice.

The website ctLawHelp.org is a wonderful resource that provides free legal help for individuals of the greatest need. Information contains contact information for Statewide Legal Service, a listing of all legal service providers, self-help guides, and checklists for a variety of legal needs. This website also provides a Pro Bono Portal for attorneys and others to connect with a variety of organizations providing varied legal services to our neediest. This is one step. There are countless other steps made by individual attorneys taking on cases at our courthouses, law students participating in legal clinics, law firm pro bono partnerships, CBA section pro bono projects, and the judicial branch's Court Support Services. Each opportunity connects people with attorneys that can help.

Yet, the demand for legal help remains. There are still not enough resources to provide access to all of those in need. We continue to ask the questions: How do we provide better service? How do we advertise existing services, provide efficiencies, and create solutions to the problem? How do we educate people that they have legal rights beyond what they might see on television and, further, that there are options even for those with very limited financial means? Attorneys play a role in crafting laws, decipher-

ing regulations, and reducing them to plain language our clients and the general population need, but we also play a critical role in finding solutions.

The Task Force to Improve Access to Legal Counsel in Civil Matters recently submitted a report to the Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly.¹ The report provides a look into our current programs and offers solutions to create a civil right to counsel. In so doing, the task force also made a number of solutions to help provide access to justice. In the coming months the CBA, including the Pro Bono Committee, will examine the ways in which we can effectuate some of the recommendations. Cost will of course be a factor and implementation of some will mean creative and strategic thinking.

It is up to us in our firms, organizations, and our communities to continue the conversation about access to justice so that we can determine what people need and how best to communicate solutions. Since November, I have participated in a number of community conversations with lawyers, law students, and members of my communities. The discussions centered around personal stories of fear, marginalization, and support. The sharing of personal narratives allowed people to listen by talking through the issues and finding commonality. Stories connect us to our communities and keep them thriving, and each conversation reminded me about the importance of community development, collaboration between communities, and the need to move beyond the stories into action.

Diversity of thought, identities, practice areas, geography, class, are all important and are part of our individual and collective conscious. Or arguably, should be. These demographic and personal identities are what motivate us, shape us, and drive us into becoming, doing, acting, and experiencing life. They also transform us into amazing zealous advocates who fight for our clients, ensure the rule of law, and to make sure that all have access to justice. **CL**

Notes

1. The Report of the Task Force to Improve Access to Legal Counsel in Civil Matters Report can be found online at https://www.cga.ct.gov/jud/tfs/20160729_Task%20Force%20to%20Improve%20Access%20to%20Legal%20Counsel%20in%20Civil%20Matters/Final%20Report.pdf. (last visited, January 5, 2017).