

# Giving Back in the New Year



By Melanie Dykas

Melanie Dykas is counsel in Locke Lord LLP's Hartford office and currently serves as pro bono director for the CBA Young Lawyers Section.

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One theory proffered as to why more attorneys do not volunteer their time to pro bono organizations is lack of information of the opportunities available. In this time of making resolutions, perhaps everyone could make one to volunteer in the New Year. To help meet this resolution, below is a sampling of opportunities in this state that may not be as well-known as others.

## Connecticut Child Justice Foundation

There are an extraordinary number of children under the custody and care of the Connecticut Department of Children and Families and/or in foster care that are in need of special educational services. Sadly, many of these children are often deprived of the additional services they need to fully understand the information that's presented to them in the classroom. Without these special services—to address physical handicaps, intellectual disabilities, comprehension deficiencies, speech and language impairments, and emotional and behavioral issues—these children are more likely to suffer academically and drop out of school. Volunteers actively advocate at the school district level, at the state administrative level, and in the courts, if necessary, to protect each child's full educational rights. However, on many occasions, all it takes is someone willing to stand up for the child's needs at a school hearing and the situations are resolved. The volunteer lawyers who have handled these cases, most of whom are not education lawyers by trade, say representing these kids is both meaningful and rewarding.

## Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants

Immigration has become a hot topic during this administration. All of the attorneys in Connecticut seeking a chance to lend a hand, look no further. Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants (formerly the International Institute of Connecticut [IICONN]) addresses the need to provide new immigrants and refugees in the state with services to help them become self-sufficient, integrated, and contributing members of the community. The organization focuses on helping those individuals who face significant barriers to adjusting to their new environment, and offers legal, social, and educational programs to help them overcome these obstacles. Some clients are victims of serious crimes such as human trafficking, torture, and domestic violence. Volunteers may help with issues related to family-based immigration, applications for permanent residence, naturalization and citizenship, legal protections for victims of violence and serious crimes, asylum applications, and representation before the immigration court.

## Pro Bono Partnership, Inc.

Many members of the bar hold the belief that only litigators are needed by pro bono organizations—those members are not informed of this wonderful organization, which just celebrated its 20th anniversary. Volunteers at Pro Bono Partnership, Inc. handle a wide range of business and transactional legal matters, including contracts, corporate, employment, intellectual property, lending/finance, nonprofit, real estate, tax, and others. What's really phenomenal, however, is that each and every one of their

clients are 501(c)(3) organizations or are seeking 501(c)(3) status—an added layer of charitable work! For all of the transactional attorneys looking to give a little back to the community after representing Fortune 500 companies for their firms, contact Pro Bono Partnership, Inc. in the New Year and learn about their opportunities.

## Project H.E.L.P. (Homeless Experience Legal Protection)

The sad fact is that homelessness continues to be an epidemic in our society and we should remain ever mindful of this—particularly during our cold, New England winters. On many occasions, a homeless person just needs to be given the chance to right their course in life and organizations like Project H.E.L.P. provide assistance to this underserved population to do just that. Oftentimes, the problem preventing the individual from applying for a job, seeking benefits to which he or she is entitled, or obtaining housing, is something a volunteer lawyer is able to resolve in a matter of hours, or by making a few simple telephone calls—like obtaining identification documents. Other cases are more complicated and require follow-up representation—but in most instances, the individual's legal problem is resolved and what had been a major obstacle in their lives is no longer a problem.

Regardless of what skillset you hold or what social issues interest you most, there are so many wonderful organizations in this state doing amazing work and are in need of volunteers. Most provide you with all the information and training necessary to volunteer and are grateful for even a few hours of your year.