

# 2019 Pro Bono Week Clinic: Increasing Access to Legal Assistance in Connecticut's Urban Communities

By ASHLEIGH BACKMAN

**R**ight now, access to legal services has never been more critical to those living in our country. We can all agree that the justice gap—the gap between legal needs and services available—contributes to systemic inequalities and perpetuates poverty. Inversely, access to free legal assistance creates opportunities of change for people and for our communities.

Unfortunately, free legal assistance remains out of reach for some low-income and modest means people. In Connecticut, as with many other states, a legal aid program that receives funding from the federal government, such as the Legal Services Corporation, must adhere to stricter client financial eligibility guidelines in order to keep their doors open. As a result, the legal aid community depends on the private bar to develop pro bono programs aimed at reaching individuals who might not financially qualify for traditional legal aid services.

Last bar year, the Connecticut Bar Association Pro Bono Committee, under the leadership of then-chair and current CBA president, Ndidi Moses, in conjunction with CBA Executive Director Keith Soressi, Attorney Marc Finer, and Paralegal Jennifer Zakrzewski, recognized this critical gap in legal service delivery. Together, they formed a Pro Bono Clinic Sub-Committee to discuss ways in which members of the Connecticut Bar Association could reach those in need of access to free legal assistance.

Pro Bono Clinic Sub-Committee members, including Ashleigh Backman,



*Bridgeport Pro Bono Clinic volunteers.*



*Volunteer Marissa Vicario at the New Britain clinic.*



*Pro Bono Committee chair Amy Lin Meyerson with clinic organizers Ashleigh Backman and Jennifer Zakrzewski.*

Craig Coulombe, Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt, Marc Finer, Tanya Gaul, Alexandra Gillett, Ndidi Moses, Don Phillips, Jon Shapiro, Keith Soressi, and Jennifer Zakrzewski (Chair), were asked to lead this undertaking.

Recognizing that the legal needs were great in urban areas, the Pro Bono Clinic Sub-Committee worked with the Bridgeport Public Library to host its clinic location. The Connecticut Bar Association

was also identified as a key location in New Britain because of its proximity to the commuter train and bus system.

Over the course of a year, the Pro Bono Clinic Sub-Committee developed an online application tool, brief service retainer agreements, and advertising materials. With the assistance of CTLawHelp.org, Connecticut Veterans Legal Center, the Connecticut Judicial Branch Court Service Centers, and network of Con-

necticut Libraries, the Pro Bono Committee announced the free legal clinic to the public.

The Sub-Committee identified that the volunteer work of pro bono attorneys, from Connecticut's leading law firms, were force multipliers to meet the volume of applicants in need of legal advice. Relying on law firm pro bono coordinators and the network of CBA members, 50 pro bono attorneys offered to volunteer at the clinics.

Paralegal volunteers were pivotal in this pro bono project. They screened applicants to identify each applicant's legal issues prior to meeting with a volunteer attorney. The paralegal volunteers were also able to manage the client's expectation of brief legal representation by explaining the legal clinic model and its ability to serve clients in need.

The Free Legal Advice Clinics were offered on two nights—in conjunction with the American Bar Association's 2019 National Pro Bono Week Campaign. Here, dedicated attorneys offered free legal advice to 60 clients in the areas of consumer law, immigration, family law, bankruptcy, small business, landlord/tenant, tax issues, and pardons. Pre-screened and pre-scheduled clients and pro bono attorneys discussed important legal issues during 30-minute appointments.

Indeed, this brief legal service clinic model is not new and does not provide direct representation to those seeking representation in court. Nonetheless, and equally as important, this pro bono model drives free access to attorneys into at-risk communities where low-income and modest means individuals might have been turned away because they make slightly more income than the federal government's strict financial eligibility guidelines.

Access to justice in Connecticut requires access to an attorney. Access to an attorney provides individuals with the legal advice needed to make informed decisions. Without these two elements, the



CBA President Ndidi N. Moses, who spearheaded the clinic initiative during her time as Pro Bono Committee chair in the 2018-2019 bar year and continued it into her presidency, with the New Britain clinic volunteers.

legal profession is failing to serve its most vulnerable clients.

The Pro Bono Week Subcommittee remains grateful to the pro bono volunteers who were willing to celebrate National Pro Bono Week by providing their time and talent to those seeking access to legal services.

Members of the Pro Bono Committee will continue to identify ways in which

its network of CBA members can provide manageable and meaningful pro bono service to Connecticut's low income and modest means individuals. ■



**Ashleigh Backman** is the pro bono program manager and intake attorney at the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center in West Haven. Committee. She is a sole practitioner in Weston, practicing business and general corporate law.

### Thank you to all of our volunteers:

- |                          |                       |                      |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Gregory Arcaro           | Dahlia Grace          | Je'Quana Orr         |
| Ashleigh Backman         | Monica Harper         | Penelope Pappas      |
| Amy Bothwell             | S. Zaid Hassan        | David Pels           |
| Livia Bardollar          | Abram Heisler         | Don Philips          |
| Michael Caldwell         | Friedrich Helisch     | Brian Quiros         |
| Orlando Codero           | Lauren Hopwood        | Mary Ann Santacrocce |
| Craig Coulombe           | Michael Kurs          | Althea Seaborn       |
| Lynn Dawson              | Kyle LaBuff           | Amber Selner         |
| Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt | Vanessa Laro          | Jon Shaprio          |
| Teresa DiNardi           | Peter Lawrence        | Robert Singer        |
| Lawrence Dvorin          | Sandy McDonough       | Richard Tenenbaum    |
| Thomas Egan              | Amy Lin Meyerson      | Cecil Thomas         |
| Michelle Fica            | Christopher Molyneaux | Marissa Vicario      |
| Vasiliki Filippakos      | Lawrence Morizio      | Susan Wakefield      |
| Marc Finer               | Ndidi Moses           | Stephen Yost         |
| Juliana Garcia-Uribe     | Andrew Nerney         | Jennifer Zakrzewski  |
| Alexandra Gillett        | Nadine Nevins         |                      |
|                          | Erin O'Neil-Baker     |                      |