



It Is Time to Take the PRO BONO CONNECT PLEDGE

By ERIN O'NEIL-BAKER

SISTER MARY JUDE NAVIGATED BETWEEN THE church's crowded waiting area and the conference room where a volunteer intake attorney met with a father and son who faced deportation. The father and son recently fled violence, poverty, extortion, and death threats in Guatemala and now live in Willimantic. A Quiché language translator was present because neither Spanish nor English is the family's first language. They nervously and eagerly waited to hear if they have a possible asylum case or perhaps the son can seek a Special Immigrant Juvenile visa. The most important question they wanted answered, however, was whether they will have an attorney with them for their upcoming hearing in the Hartford immigration court. The idea of appearing in court alone was terrifying for the father, who feared returning to Guatemala and understood that he could not win his case on his own. At the end of the meeting, Sister Mary Jude escorted the family to the door, nodded, and said, "Yes, an attorney will be assigned to you." But she fretted: where will she find an attorney for them?

Many people in Connecticut facing homelessness, deportation, violence, and financial crisis need attorneys but cannot afford representation. Those who have no hope of a level playing field turn to legal aid services for help. The need, however, surpasses the ability to provide representation to all who seek it. CBA members can help alleviate that need through Pro Bono Connect, a CBA program that allows volunteer attorneys to connect with legal service providers to be assigned a pro bono case. Pro Bono Connect also offers volunteers relevant, on-demand trainings to prepare for pro bono representation. The program was developed by the Legal Aid Sub-Committee of the CBA Covid-19 Taskforce in 2020 and currently has 52 volunteer attorneys who have signed up.

DON PHILIPS

According to Don Philips, the pro bono attorney manager at Statewide Legal Services (SLS) of Connecticut, CBA pro bono attorneys are "vital to SLS' mission and ability to provide high quality, pro bono services to its clients." In 2020, SLS received over 50,000 contacts for legal services and generally has approximately 200 active cases that are assigned to pro bono attorneys. "Pro bono attorneys provide extremely valuable services for our clients, but the need for legal help far exceeds our ability to refer most clients to a volunteer attorney. We are always looking to recruit and grow our pro bono panels," Philips explained. Pro Bono Connect helps bridge the gap between CBA volunteers and the needs of SLS. "The relationship between the CBA and SLS is so important because it is crucial for SLS to maintain a robust panel of pro bono attorneys," Philips explained.

MELVIN A. SIMON

For CBA member Melvin Simon of the law firm Cohn, Birnbaum, Shea, "The license to practice law is a privilege. There is a responsibility to make sure those members of society [in need of legal representation] are not shut out of the process." That responsibility led Simon to take the Pro Bono Pledge and agree to take an eviction defense case. "I have been doing pro bono work in the housing area since 1983. I recognized that there are large numbers of tenants that could use my knowledge and skills and I wanted to help those who can't afford an attorney," Simon said.

CILEENA TERRA

Volunteering through Pro Bono Connect is not only an option for experienced attorneys. Newly licensed attorney Cileena Terra, an associate at Biller, Sachs, Zito & LeMoult, decided



to take the Pro Bono Pledge in order to assist low-income individuals who need representation in immigration and bankruptcy cases. Terra, who represents clients in homeowner's insurance claims and plaintiff's personal injury claims, is excited to "have the opportunity to get training and become well versed in new areas of law." She has received full support from her firm to volunteer her time through Pro Bono Connect and is "looking forward to working directly with clients and getting hands-on experience with immigration cases."

Don Philips acknowledges that "there is a significant justice gap in our state and anything we can do to close it by increasing volunteerism is important. We are extremely grateful for the assistance and support we get from the CBA." If you are interested in taking the Pro Bono Pledge, "Think about the time you can commit and the type of legal issues that interest you. If going to court is not your thing, there are non-court opportunities such as drafting powers of attorney, simple wills, or working in a legal clinic helping clients to draft court forms. Even if you have a little bit of

time there is an option for you and training is always available," Philips said. "I encourage you to look. Get into Pro Bono Connect and think about what you want to do. If you're still unsure, please contact me and I'll help you to find a program that might work for you," Philips added.

As attorneys, we have an ethical obligation to provide pro bono legal representation to those in need. Make the connection now with a person in need of your help. Use Pro Bono Connect to volunteer your time and benefit from free training. Extending ourselves to aid others is part of our calling as a profession. Please help bridge the justice gap and join the fight by taking the Pro Bono Pledge and lend your legal talents to Connecticut's most vulnerable residents. ■

Erin O'Neil-Baker is an immigration attorney practicing in Hartford. She is the co-chair of the Immigration Committee, co-chair of the Pro Bono Connect sub-committee, and former CBA Secretary.

READY TO TAKE PRO BONO PLEDGE?

Here are all the details on how to begin, take the pledge, access the training, and be assigned a case.

What is the sign-up process?

Navigate to ctbar.org/ProBonoConnect to start the process. Under "For Attorneys," click on the "Learn More" button and then select the "Sign Up Now" button. Fill out the online form, where you will be able to provide your basic contact information and the type of case you would like as well as your preferred geographical area. Once you submit the form, your name and selections will be shared with Statewide Legal Services (SLS), which will contact you with appropriate case referrals.

What is the Pro Bono Pledge?

The Pro Bono Pledge is a personal commitment to take at least one pro bono referral per year. If you take the pledge, you will be able to access on-demand

webinar training videos and supporting materials relevant to the case referral preferences you selected, for free. The trainings are available for one year after signing up.

What areas of law are available?

Landlord/Tenant (eviction defense, security deposits), Immigration Law (Removal Defense, Asylum and SIJ), Family Law (divorce, custody, etc.), School Expulsions, Employment (Unemployment and Employment Discrimination), Wills/Health Care Directives/Power of Attorney, Social Security, and Consumer cases (debt collection, creditor harassment and bankruptcy).

How do I access the trainings?

Once you have taken the pledge, the trainings will appear automatically in your CBA Education Portal Dashboard. If you chose not to take the pledge, you

may pay to access the trainings within the "CBA Pro Bono Connect" portion of the CBA Education Portal Course Catalogue.

What trainings are available?

There are 14 on-demand webinar trainings. Topics include eviction and foreclosure defense, emergency custody hearings, domestic violence protective and restraining orders, introductions to immigration law, immigration detention and bond hearings, consumer bankruptcy, auto repossessions, and veterans administration benefits.

What about malpractice insurance?

The CBA does not provide malpractice insurance coverage. However, some of Connecticut's legal aid providers are able to offer malpractice insurance coverage with a case referral.

RECENT PRO BONO RULE CHANGES

A recent rule change to Rule 5.5 allows emeritus and out-of-state attorneys in good standing to provide pro bono legal representation under the supervision of a legal aid organization or bar association project.

Changes to Rule 1.8(e) allows attorneys to provide modest financial assistance for basic human needs to indigent clients receiving pro bono legal assistance.