

We Can Always Do More

CLE Credit for Pro Bono Work

By DAN A. BRODY

Consider this: *the best way to learn is by doing.* I started my legal career in 2015, first as a law clerk and then at my current firm. I've been fortunate enough to have a number of mentors, both inside and outside of my firm, and have learned and developed due to their guidance. Everyone is different with their own strengths and weaknesses. We all learn in different ways. Mentors have their own style, which allows them to be effective for some, but not necessarily others. In my experience, I've learned the most through being given opportunities, be that increased responsibility handling cases or chances to lead teams and organizations. That brings me to pro bono. My first case as a barred attorney was a pro bono domestic violence representation. Years later, I lead the pro bono domestic violence group at Robinson+Cole and proudly support domestic violence non-profit organizations throughout the state. I attribute a lot of my professional growth to handling these pro bono matters, which have allowed me to find my style, voice, and gain experiences in client meetings, developing strategy, and in court. That development has translated to how I handle billable matters and I recognize how each area compliments the other as I continue this never-ending career of learning.



I have attended a number of Continuing Legal Education (CLE) sessions and come away from them with mixed impressions and, sometimes, little by way of education. CLE credits are a way for attorneys to maintain and enhance legal skills, knowledge, and competence. I think of CLE as a brief return to the law school classroom for practicing attorneys. But how many attorneys say they learned more in their first year of practice than they did in all of law school? Attending panels and conferences, sometimes at a substantial financial cost, can be valuable especially when learning about new or emerging practice areas, but it may not be

the ideal way to enhance legal skills and knowledge.

By my count, 17 of the states that have mandatory CLE requirements—not all of them require it—also permit attorneys to obtain CLE credit through pro bono work. The American Bar Association has also spoken on this topic. It is not a new idea; it is just something new. The specifics of CLE-credit-for-pro-bono-work programs vary from state to state. Some states cap the amount of CLE credit earned through pro bono work, such as Minnesota, which has a cap of six hours per reporting cycle. Others permit one hour of CLE credit to be earned for three

hours of pro bono work (Nevada), five hours of pro bono work (Arizona), or six hours of pro bono work (Ohio). As with CLE credits, some states allow pro bono hours to be carried over to the following reporting period (Tennessee). Despite the differences in implementation, I do think the various systems acknowledge a common theme, that the best way to learn is by doing.

Pro bono work and access to justice serve a valuable segment and need in our society. Inaccessible justice is one of the most pressing problems in the communities around us and in our state. Most lawyers take on pro bono work because it is enriching, feels good, and can change a client's life or living situation. But most lawyers do not take on pro bono work. Pro bono remains an aspirational concept, as does a significant segment of our state's population's ability to pay sizable legal fees. The internal rewards are significant, but there could always be more.

Providing CLE credit for pro bono hours could expose attorneys to more work, thereby increasing experience and competence, and provide meaningful legal services to underserved populations and communities. If competence in a pro bono area is a concern, the Connecticut Bar Association offers and supports a number of pro bono programs and opportunities that come with experienced attorneys as resources and pre-recorded CLE programs addressing the issues of the particular program. In their own way, law schools have endorsed the leaning by doing method by offering increased pro bono and clinical opportunities to students. Consider this the beginning of a proposal to add Connecticut to the list of states that blend continued leaning and access to justice into one. ■



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