



Representing the Underrepresented

By JAMES T. (TIM) SHEARIN

Road signs advertising lawyer services have become ubiquitous on Connecticut's highways. Television and radio advertisements describing our services are common. If there is a wall to be adorned, a side of a bus to be plastered, or air to be filled, we are there broadcasting our message of how we can help. The objective is clear—paying clients. What would you think, however, if you were driving down the road and saw a billboard that said, “Everyone deserves justice whether they can afford it or not. If you can't, call me.” Or try this one, “Need legal help for your non-profit board? I am happy to help!” The cynics among us would ask, “What's the angle?” For the rest of us, we might pause and ask the question, “What could I get out of doing pro bono work?”

The billboard hypothetical is far from absurd. They don't buy billboards, but the message of offering free help is found in many

of the websites of our legal service providers in the State. Just to name a couple, Statewide Legal Services website says, “If we can help you, we will give you free legal advice. We will answer your questions. We will help you understand your legal rights and responsibilities so you can make the right choices for you and your family.” Connecticut Legal Services states: “Everyone has basic needs from stable affordable housing to medical treatment to food security. Sometimes, legal problems prevent people from meeting those basic needs. We use our legal skills and advocacy to help clients, their families, and their communities solve urgent life problems.” The Center for Children's Advocacy is dedicated to protecting and promoting “the legal rights of Connecticut's low-income children and youth so they have equitable opportunities for good health, a quality education and a successful transition to adulthood.” The lawyers who work for these and their sister organizations have answered the call.

Image credit: koiguo, Tonya Constantine, artisteer/Getty Image

I realize that most of us are not in the business of offering our services on a full-time basis for free, but that does not mean we should not answer the question: Why should we provide legal services for free for those who cannot otherwise hire us? For a small minority, the answer may be because the Rules of Professional Conduct strongly suggest we do so, but I would submit those lawyers look at it from the perspective of lost time and money, and do not consider it on the client level or what role pro bono representation plays as part of our system of justice. When thought of in the latter context, pro bono service offers both tangible and intangible rewards. Pro bono service permits lawyers, whether seasoned veterans or rookies, to learn new areas of the law, and hone our skills in the process. It provides an opportunity to form connections with clients and adversaries we might not otherwise meet, making us better, more well-rounded counselors. It allows us to interact with the communities we serve, especially when volunteering to provide services for non-profit institutions and the constituencies we serve. It assists the Judicial Branch in operating more efficiently and effectively as it seeks to provide meaningful access to the courts for those whose rights are in jeopardy. And, pro bono work helps foster the profession's image as one committed to the rule of law.

While all of these benefits are reason enough to undertake pro bono work, I submit that for the vast majority of lawyers who provide pro bono services the answer to "why do it?" is much simpler. They do it because it is the right thing to do. It is the right thing to assist a single mother from being wrongfully evicted; it is the right thing to secure benefits to a veteran whose service to the country has been ignored; it is the right thing to represent someone who is wrongfully accused of being deprived of her liberty. In the words of Justice Sonia Sotomayor: "We educated, privileged lawyers have a professional and moral duty to represent the underrepresented in our society, to ensure that justice exists for all, both legal and economic justice." For most, that is their personal billboard, they extend their hand because they can, not because they must. They do not look for acclaim; they do not try to monetize their services. They answer the call because to ignore it is to ignore their obligation to make sure that "access to justice" means something.

I applaud all whose pro bono billboard reads this way—"I help because I recognize that in some small part I can bring justice to those who would otherwise be deprived of it if without my help." Whether a private attorney or one affiliated with Connecticut's outstanding legal services organizations, thank you. ■



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CBA Free Legal Advice Clinic: Volunteers Needed

Tuesday, July 23, 2024

10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Wednesday, July 24, 2024

10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

If you have 30 minutes free, you can volunteer. Volunteer attorneys will answer legal questions in their area of practice during a 30-minute remote session with a client.

Volunteers are needed in the following areas:

- Fraudulent Business/Debt Collection
- Employee Rights/Unemployment
- Immigration Law
- Landlord/Tenant
- Family Law
- Tax Law
- Bankruptcy
- Pardons
- Wills and Estates
- Torts

Volunteer opportunities are available for paralegals and law students as well. Visit ctbar.org/FreeLegalAdviceClinics to learn more and register.

