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Encouraging In-House Legal Department Pro Bono

By **DAN A. BRODY**

We hear from many in-house or corporate counsel who are interested in doing pro bono work, but worry their skill set or experience would not be of value to vulnerable populations. That interest tracks with the rise of corporate pro bono participation, initiatives, and programs across the country. The American Bar Association and organizations like the Pro Bono Institute honor a corporate legal department and a pro bono partnership between a corporate legal department and law firm annually. And the number of corporate legal departments with pro bono programs and policies facilitating

in-house counsel pro bono work with legal organizations in their communities is growing.

In many states, as is the case in Connecticut, in-house attorneys, even those not licensed to practice in the state, may provide pro bono legal services under the supervision of a legal aid organization or bar association engaging in pro bono work. In Connecticut, that rule is Practice Book § 2-15A(c)(5) which permits in-house counsel to engage in “any and all” pro bono work undertaken through a legal aid organization, bar association project, or under the supervision of a member of the Connecticut bar

also working on the pro bono representation. Numerous Connecticut legal aid organizations and pro bono projects can be found on the CBA’s website (ctbar.org/ProBonoOrganizations) and are always looking for volunteers.

Of those opportunities, some are especially well-suited for in-house counsel. For example, Free Legal Answers (CT.FreeLegalAnswers.org) is an online question and answer website where individuals with low or no income can privately post a civil legal question. Volunteer attorneys provide confidential written responses to those questions. Some corporate counsel tell us they find it particularly easy to volunteer with the Free Legal Answers program because there are questions about many different areas of law, including topics like contract interpretation or employment law questions, so litigation experience is not necessary. When volunteering with Free Legal Answers, responses are not provided in real time; volunteers have a chance

to do research, ask around, or analyze an issue before writing a response.

One example of a legal department making a big difference through pro bono service and Free Legal Answers is Travelers Insurance. In spring of 2023, Travelers was already offering a pro bono program where legal professionals in Connecticut and throughout the country could volunteer their time to support clients with many types of legal work, including election, family, immigration, landlord-tenant, veterans' affairs, and contract matters. Maggie Anderson-Murphy,¹ a Claim Legal lawyer in Traveler's Hartford office and member of the Travelers Pro Bono Committee, saw an opportunity to do even more pro bono and worked with other lawyers from Travelers to begin holding monthly team-building pro bono events where attorneys collaborate to answer questions on the Free Legal Answers website. These monthly events provide an opportunity for Travelers employees to offer their diverse skill sets and expertise to work together to find effective solutions in areas such as landlord-tenant or consumer protection law. Maggie says through Travelers' involvement with Free Legal Answers, she has "the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues across Travelers who are passionate about harnessing our collective experience and expertise to help clients who are in need. This sense of purpose makes me proud to work at Travelers and work amongst people who value empathy, community, and volunteerism."

Another pro bono program of particular interest to in-house counsel is Lawyers in Libraries. Through that program, attorneys attend a two-hour event at a local library once a month. Attorneys can volunteer with colleagues or friends. The attorneys meet with members of the public to provide short legal guidance or advice. Members of the public often have questions about a broad range of issues including trying to better understand legal terms in a document, transactional matters, and work-place related situations. In-house counsel can be a great resource to clients through the Lawyers in Libraries program.

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In addition to these CBA programs, there are many other pro bono opportunities that are well-suited to corporate or in-house legal departments. For example, in-house lawyers can assist non-profit and charitable organizations with business formation matters through the Pro Bono Partnership, help individuals with business-related matters through a legal aid organization, or be trained to assist victims of abuse in restraining order hearings through the Pro Bono Restraining Order Project.

Importantly, many of these projects provide malpractice insurance coverage for volunteers. For example, Free Legal Answers and Lawyers in Libraries, both mentioned above, provide insurance for volunteers. Those options, which are just the start as in-house attorneys can form partnerships with law firms and other attorneys on pro bono matters, represent a wide array of pro bono opportunities covering a diverse range of topics, all of which provide legal assistance to low-income persons and communities.

On top of the community and societal benefits, in-house legal departments can benefit in a number of ways by engaging in pro bono work and programs. Just a few include the following:

- a change-of-pace and engagement boosting opportunity to use legal skills;
- development of new legal skills and insight into new areas of law (prior legal skills are not always necessary, and pro bono organizations can find the right fit for every volunteer);
- professional development skill, teamwork, and leadership building or broadening opportunities; and
- camaraderie-building engagement of

in-house attorneys across internal departments on legal matters; and morale-boosting "good work" aligned with corporate and individual values.

Undoubtedly, pro bono service is a key component of the legal profession. There are ample opportunities, and benefits, for attorneys in all lines of work to engage and collaborate on pro bono projects. Maggie Anderson Murphy says it well: "Participating in pro bono work is extremely rewarding to me because we can see and feel the impact we are making on the lives of clients who are truly in need in a very tangible way. To be able to lend a hand to those who may be facing some of the most challenging times in their lives leaves me feeling invigorated, motivated, and more connected to my community." Give it a try and find what works for you. ■



Dan A. Brody is an associate at Robinson & Cole LLP. He is a member of the firm's Litigation Section and focuses his practice on complex business litigation matters, government and internal investigations, corporate compliance, and criminal defense.

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- ¹ Maggie Anderson-Murphy handles complex matters involving asbestos, pollution, and toxic torts. She has been involved with pro bono work for over 30 years and has worked with clients in immigration, family law, and election law. She first became involved with pro bono work through the Connecticut Bar Association on a case where she represented a client in a divorce. The impact she was able to make for this client left a lasting impression on her and she has been actively involved with pro bono work ever since. Maggie is currently on the Travelers Pro Bono Committee, where she serves on the Expo Subcommittee.