Volume 37 | Number 1

September | October 2026

# CT LAWYER




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Cover Image Credit: themacx | Getty Images
diane555 | Getty Images

# A Place to Belong

By J. PAUL VANCE, JR.



*J. Paul Vance, Jr. is the CBA's 103rd president. Attorney Vance is a partner at Logan Vance Sullivan & Kores LLP in Torrington where he focuses his practice on plaintiff's personal injury, workers' compensation, and medical malpractice. He formerly served as the State of Connecticut Claims Commissioner and has served in both elected and appointed positions in local government. Paul believes he inherited his love of reading from his mother, Meg Vance, a longtime emergency room nurse at St. Mary's Hospital in Waterbury. Please email him with any thoughts, book recommendations, or ideas as to how we can improve the CBA at pvance@torringtonlaw.com.*

When I was growing up, I didn't know a single lawyer. Law wasn't the family business, and there was no roadmap to the profession. If someone asked where my journey to the law began, I'd probably point to my library card from the Silas Bronson Library in Waterbury.

Every week, my mother would take me to the Silas Bronson Library. I wandered the stacks without any plan, grabbing mysteries, biographies, and whatever looked interesting. Libraries have a remarkable way of convincing a child that every profession is possible. Long before I even knew a lawyer, books introduced me to them. The lawyers I met in those pages were problem-solvers, advocates, and people willing to stand between the powerful and the powerless.

I loved the nerdy, methodical problem-solving of *Encyclopedia Brown*. I admired the unshakable moral compass of Atticus Finch. And if I'm being completely honest, I also thought Mitch McDeere's brand-new BMW and the promise of having his student loans paid off in *The Firm* sounded pretty incredible—at least until the rest of the story unfolded. Looking back, each of those characters represented a different reason to become a lawyer. One taught me to ask questions. One taught me to do the right thing. One emphasized that success without integrity is not success at all.

When I walked into law school as a first-year student, reality hit me quickly. During one of our first icebreakers, classmates confidently talked about law review, judicial clerkships, and careers in Big Law. I had no idea what law review was. I didn't know what "Big Law" meant. Truthfully, I barely understood what most lawyers actually did from day to day. I wasn't afraid of hard work. I had two parents that worked overtime. What scared me was my belief that everyone else in the room possessed some knowledge that I didn't even know I was supposed to have.

I remember calling my mother after that class and telling her I was thinking about dropping out and coming home. I was convinced everyone else had received an instruction manual that I had somehow missed. They spoke the language of the legal profession. I didn't.

For the first time in a long time, I felt like I didn't belong. I suspect I wasn't alone. Many lawyers—regardless of where they come from—have had moments when they questioned whether they belonged.

Regardless of how people define diversity, equity, and inclusion, I have found myself returning to one word: **inclusion**. To me, inclusion means ensuring that people are welcomed, respected, heard, and given an opportunity to contribute. That should be one of the defining com-

mitments of our Connecticut Bar Association and of our profession.

Inclusion begins by ensuring that a new lawyer feels comfortable walking into a section meeting for the first time. It requires that solo practitioners feel every bit as valued as lawyers from large firms. It extends to government lawyers, legal aid attorneys, prosecutors, public defenders, and corporate counsel, whose perspectives strengthen our profession. The rule of law depends upon confidence in our legal system. That confidence grows when people know they will be heard, respected, and treated fairly. Inclusion strengthens not only the Connecticut Bar Association, but also the public's trust in our profession.

I eventually discovered that I did belong—not because I knew the right people, but because members of this remarkable profession welcomed me, challenged me, taught me, and invested in me. My mentors have been my employers, my colleagues, and members of the judiciary. Their generosity changed the course of my career.

I think of Attorney Maureen Burns, a gifted litigator and former member of the Connecticut Bar Association's House of Delegates, Board of Governors, and Executive Committee. When I first joined the House, I was still finding my footing as a young and inexperienced lawyer. Maureen never made me feel like I was the new lawyer in the room. She treated me as a colleague from the very beginning. She introduced me to other members, asked my thoughts on policy, and made sure I felt welcome. In truth, I was nowhere near her equal in experience, knowledge, or skill. Yet she never acted as though those differences mattered.

Looking back, I doubt she realized the impact those simple acts of kindness had on me. She wasn't delivering a lecture on inclusion. She was practicing it. She reminded me that belonging is often created not through grand gestures, but through a handshake, an introduction, an encouraging word, or an invitation to join the conversation.

I also think of Judge Peter Zarella, who inherited me as his law clerk on the Appellate Court. I arrived as a young, inexperienced, and, admittedly, immature lawyer with far more enthusiasm for lawyer's league softball than appellate opinions. Judge Zarella could have dismissed my ideas or simply told me what to do. Instead, he listened to me. He challenged my thinking, carefully read through and edited my often-clumsy draft opinions, and expected better of me each and every day.

He taught me that excellence is not demanded through criticism alone; it is cultivated through patience, accountability, and trust. He expected more from me than I expected from myself, and he refused to let me settle for good enough. Over time, the lessons he instilled about preparation, professionalism, and craftsmanship became habits that have shaped my career ever since.

That, too, is inclusion. It is believing that someone belongs enough to invest in them. It is taking the time to teach, to mentor, and to expect excellence—not because someone has already arrived, but because you believe in who they can become.

Neither probably remember those moments today. I do.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to experience that same generosity from my employers, my colleagues, and members of the judiciary. Each of them invested in me in ways that shaped not only the lawyer I became, but the leader I aspire to be.

As President of the Connecticut Bar Association, I want us to do the same for others. I want every lawyer, regardless of background, practice setting, or experience, to find a place where they are welcomed, where they are encouraged to contribute, and where they know they belong—even on the days when doubt creeps in. The CBA should be an inclusive home to our profession.

My hope is that years from now another lawyer will tell similar stories. Not because they came from the same place I did, but because someone in the room made them feel welcome. Someone answered their questions. Someone introduced them to a colleague. Someone convinced them to stay when they wondered whether they belonged.

Because inclusion is not about where we start. It is about making sure there is always a seat at the table—and an open door—for everyone committed to the service of justice.

Looking back, I realize that my career was shaped less by the opportunities I found than by the people who chose to invest in me. That is the tradition I hope we continue—not because every lawyer's path is the same, but because every lawyer deserves to know they belong. If we can do that for one another, we will strengthen not only our Connecticut Bar Association but also the public's confidence in the profession we are privileged to serve. ■

***"As President of the Connecticut Bar Association, I want us to do the same for others. I want every lawyer, regardless of background, practice setting, or experience, to find a place where they are welcomed, where they are encouraged to contribute, and where they know they belong—even on the days when doubt creeps in. The CBA should be an inclusive home to our profession."***

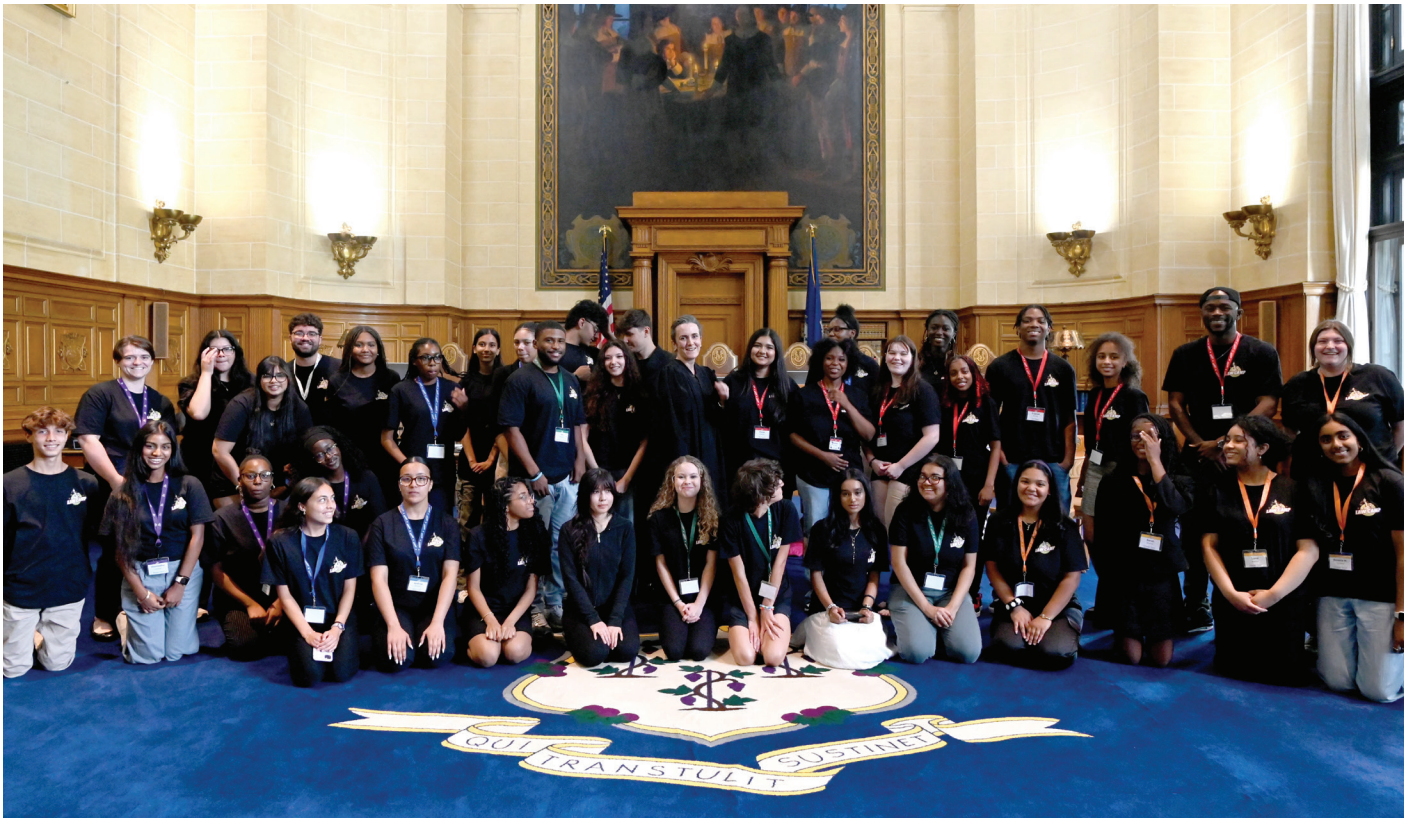
# CBA Hosts 2026 LAW Camp for High School Students

**During the week of July 6,** the Connecticut Bar Association welcomed high school students to its 2026 Law Camp, a weeklong program designed to introduce participating students to the legal profession through interactive educational sessions, hands-on advocacy training, and a mock trial competition.

Held at the University of Connecticut School of Law, the Hartford Superior Court, and the Connecticut Supreme Court, LAW Camp gave the students an opportunity to explore the legal system while learning directly from attorneys and judges. The camp began at UConn School of Law with Dean and Professor of Law Eboni S. Nelson; CBA DEI Co-Chair Ronald J. Houde, Jr.; and CBA Immediate Past President Emily A. Gianquinto introduced themselves to the students and welcoming them. You are going to learn general skills that will help you in high school and beyond," Attorney Gianquinto said. "Enjoy the camp, ask a lot of questions, and get to know people."

Throughout the week, students participated in sessions covering a wide range of topics covering the Connecticut court system, lawsuits, courtroom advocacy and etiquette, legal extracurricular opportunities, bar associations, legal careers, and strategies for preparing for law school. Students also received instruction on the fundamentals of trial advocacy, including opening statements, closing arguments, direct and cross examinations, objections, impeachment, and the effective use of exhibits.

A central component of the camp was a mock trial competition. Students were divided into teams and worked closely with coaches throughout the week to develop case strategy, prepare witness examinations, and refine their courtroom




*The students attending Law Camp gathered at the Connecticut Supreme Court for the culmination of the camp's mock trial competition.*

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presentations. Daily team preparation sessions allowed students to build confidence and apply the advocacy skills they learned during instructional workshops.

On Thursday, students visited the Hartford Superior Court, where they toured the courthouse, observed live court proceedings, and participated in a session focused on courtroom advocacy and professional etiquette. Following their courthouse experience, each team visited different local law firms, including Morrison Mahoney, McCarter & English, Shipman & Goodwin, Day Pitney, Robinson + Cole, and Pullman & Comley, where the students enjoyed lunch and continued preparing for the mock trial competition with guidance from their coaches and practicing attorneys.

The week concluded with the mock trial competition, which began at the Hartford Superior Court. Following preliminary rounds, the top two teams advanced to the final round, which was held in the Connecticut Supreme Court chambers. The two teams presented their cases before Judge Nuala E. Droney, who after hearing the case announced a not guilty verdict and declared the team acting as the defense as the winners of the competition. Judge Droney provided remarks to all the students, praising them for their professionalism and impressive work throughout the week. The camp closed with a reception held at UConn School of Law, where CBA DEI Co-Chair Ronald J. Houde, Jr. and CBA President J. Paul Vance, Jr. provided closing remarks to the students. "You're doing a really important thing, spending the time to embrace the law and to learn the law," stated President Vance. "You're not lawyers yet, and maybe some of you will choose to do other great things in your life. But doing this is really important."

By combining classroom instruction with hands-on experiences inside Connecticut's courts and law firms, LAW Camp provided students with a meaningful introduction to the practice of law while helping them develop advocacy, public speaking, teamwork, and critical thinking skills. ■

# Young Lawyers Section Leaders Attend 2026 Annual Leadership Retreat and Receive Service Awards




*(L to R) YLS Secretary Meaghan C. Kirby; YLS Chair Sara Bonaiuto; CBA President J. Paul Vance, Jr.; YLS Chair-Elect Jermaine A. Brookshire, Jr.; YLS Treasurer Olivia Benson*

**The Connecticut Bar Association's Young Lawyers Section (YLS)** hosted its annual leadership retreat on August 6-8 at Foxwoods Casino in Ledyard. The YLS Executive Committee holds this event each summer to familiarize new members of the committee with the duties of their leadership roles and to present awards to members of the committee for their service during the previous bar year. In addition to trainings held throughout the day, the retreat included the presentation of awards to four YLS Executive Committee members for their service during the 2025-2026 bar year. 2025-2026 YLS Chair Paige M. Vaillancourt presented the following awards:

**Danielle A. Erickson** received the **Leadership Award** for her initiative in organizing the section's 2025 etiquette dinner, which provided valuable guidance to attendees on appropriate decorum for formal dinner events. She also consistently volunteered for the section's initiatives throughout the year, often stepping up when the YLS was in

need. Attorney Erickson is an associate at Pullman & Comley LLC's Hartford office.

**Jeffrey M. Beck** received the **Pro Bono Award** for contributing a total of over 303 pro bono service and community volunteer hours toward the YLS Executive Committee's yearly 1000 service hour pledge, which is over 25% of the cumulative 1192.88 total hours accrued for the 2025-2026 bar year. In addition to the pro bono hours he contributed, he consistently volunteered for YLS and CBA initiatives. Attorney Beck is the founder of J. Beck Legal PLLC located in West Hartford.

**Hugh T. Sokolski, Jr.** received the **Star of the Year Award** for the enormous amount of time and effort he put into the section's 2026 Diversity Dinner. Through this event, he brought together 160 law students, practitioners, and scholars from the CBA's Future of the Legal Profession Scholars Program at West Hartford's Pond House Café for a night of productive conversation focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Connecticut legal community. Attorney Sokolski is an associate at Jackson Lewis PC's Hartford office.

**Erin M. Daly** received the **Rookie of the Year Award** for her consistent participation in YLS events and service as a volunteer throughout her first year on the YLS Executive Committee as well as contributing the 128 pro bono service hours during the bar year. Attorney Daly is the founder of Daly Law & Strategy located in Trumbull.

"The Young Lawyers Section is built on the dedication, leadership, and generosity of its members, and this year's award recipients truly exemplify those qualities," said 2025-2026 Young Lawyers Section Chair and CBA Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Paige M. Vaillancourt. "Their commitment to serving the profession, supporting their colleagues, and giving back to our communities has made a meaningful impact throughout the past bar year. I am grateful for their contributions and excited to see the continued leadership they will bring to the Connecticut Bar Association in the years ahead."

## IN MEMORIAM



**James D. Moran Jr.** (1966-2026) was born in Waterbury and attended Holy Cross High School before earning a bachelor's degree from Cornell University and a J.D. from Tulane University School of Law. He practiced workers' compensation law for several years at the law firm Mahar Williams before establishing his own solo practice as a defense attorney. Throughout his career his knowledge, professionalism, and dedication earned him the respect of colleagues and clients alike.



**Peter Motti** (1948-2026) was born in New Haven and graduated from East Haven High School. He earned his undergraduate degree from Seton Hall University before earning his J.D. from William & Mary Law School. After graduating, he moved to Branford, where he established his legal practice and served his community for many years.

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# Access to Justice in Connecticut

By SONG KIM

Connecticut is a small but mighty state, with an outsized commitment to access to justice. According to the Justice Index, a data-intensive ranking system developed by the National Center for Access to Justice that measures how well the 50 states and Washington, DC have adopted six key policy categories, Connecticut ranks 4th in the nation.[1] Our legal aid and legal services organizations serve tens of thousands of clients every year through high-impact representation. And hundreds of thousands more self-represented parties get help through our court support staff, law librarians, and tools like CTLawHelp.org.[2] And Connecticut's legal community is a collegial one, strong at collaborating to drive progress to bridge the justice gap, from the right to counsel for tenants facing eviction or loss of a housing subsidy,[3] to MCLE credits for pro bono work.[4] Members of the bar and bench here take seriously the responsibility that comes with our privileged access to the legal system.

But there is still much to be done. Despite our strong overall ranking in the Justice Index, Connecticut falls to 20th in the country in Attorney Access.[5] Forty percent of Connecticut households struggle to meet basic needs, and that number is only growing.[6] According to the Civil Legal Needs Assessment, a report commissioned by the Connecticut Bar Foundation, 72 percent of Connecticut's low-income residents have experienced a civil legal need.

These numbers are not simply statistics. They represent people who face losing their homes with no one to help them understand their rights as a tenant, and people who face custody battles in court for their children with no legal advice. They represent survivors facing an abuser in court alone, and parents losing benefits over paperwork they couldn't understand.

The lack of access to a lawyer doesn't affect everyone equally. It perpetuates inequities because it falls hardest on communities that already face disparities: Connecticut's low-income population is disproportionately Black or Latino, includes a high number of children, and is over-represented by people with disabilities. Expanding legal representation for those unable to afford it can play a part in ensuring a more equitable Connecticut as a whole.

## The Connecticut Bar Association and Access to Justice

The state's Access to Justice Commission, led by the Judicial Branch, coordinates stakeholders across the legal community to drive lasting, meaningful change. Connecticut is also home to legal aid and legal services organizations running creative, high-impact programs to serve the residents of our state. You can learn more about these organizations and programs in the articles throughout this issue of *CT Lawyer.*

The Connecticut Bar Association occupies a unique place in this landscape. Our members are attorneys with expertise across every area of law and deep relationships throughout the state's legal community. Through committees like our Pro Bono, Legal Aid and Public Defense, and Emeritus Committees, the CBA brings together attorneys who understand what's at stake in narrowing the access gap. Sections like Alternative Dispute Resolution, Bankruptcy, and Estates and Probate have created pro bono programs of their own, putting their specialized expertise directly to work for those who need it.

The CBA's access to justice programs are designed to fill some of the gaps that remain. We serve Connecticut residents who can't afford an attorney, regardless of income or immigration status. While we can't offer full-scope representation to most of the clients we serve directly, our programs are built to lower the barrier on both sides. We aim to make it easier for clients to get help where they are and attorneys to volunteer their time and expertise through time-bound virtual or local opportunities.

## CBA Pro Bono Programs

### *Free Legal Advice Clinics*[7]

Free Legal Advice Clinics are virtual quarterly clinics held via Zoom. Our intake volunteers screen clients and get basic information on a client's needs. Attorney volunteers are individually matched with clients based on expertise ahead of time. During

Image credit: Aerial Mike | AdobeStock

the clinic, volunteer attorneys meet with each client for 30 minutes. Attorneys can take as few or as many appointments as makes sense with their schedule during the two-day clinic.

### *Free Legal Answers*[8]

The Free Legal Answers platform is an online portal for members of the public to ask legal questions for attorney volunteers to answer asynchronously. This program provides attorneys the flexibility to contribute at any time, as well as the time to research questions or consult with a colleague before responding.

### *Lawyers in Libraries*[9]

In 12 cities and towns around the state and growing, public libraries host Lawyers in Libraries with CBA volunteer attorneys once a month. Members of the public seeking legal assistance are required to sign up to reserve a spot in advance. Our librarian partners typically provide our volunteers with a list ahead of time, so attorneys have advanced notice of topics of discussion. During the event, volunteers meet with members of the public one-on-one for 15-20 minutes. Volunteers do not need to have any specific expertise in a particular area of law.

### *Lawyer-Client Fee Dispute Resolution Program*[10]

The Fee Dispute Resolution Program provides lawyers and clients with an opportunity to attempt to resolve disputes over legal fees through mediation and/or arbitration. Either an attorney or a client may submit a petition to begin the process, and the parties will be given an opportunity to choose a mediator or arbitrator from a panel of experienced volunteers.

### *Bankruptcy Pro Bono Program*[11]

The Bankruptcy Pro Bono Program is a volunteer pro bono panel for Chapter 7 bankruptcy cases, run jointly with the CBA's Commercial Law and Bankruptcy Section and Statewide Legal Services (SLS). SLS screens and refers qualifying low-income applicants to a matched attorney based on court location.

## Join Us

At the heart of all this work are the volunteers who give their time and expertise. Later in this issue, you'll hear directly from some of our committed and generous member volunteers about what drives them and what this work means to them.

If you've ever wanted to use your legal training to make a real difference for a neighbor who needs it, this is your invitation.

Learn more and sign up at ctbar.org/volunteer or email Song Kim, Director of Access to Justice and Equity, at skim@ctbar.org. ■

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***Song Kim*** *is the Director of Access to Justice and Equity at the Connecticut Bar Association.*

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**NOTES**

[1] https://ncaj.org/state-rankings/justice-index

[2] Civil Legal Needs Assessment: 2025 Report Commissioned by the Connecticut Bar Foundation. October 2025.

[3] Public Act No. 21-34.

[4] https://www.jud.ct.gov/mcle/credit.htm#1

[5] https://ncaj.org/state-rankings/justice-index/attorney-access

[6] State of ALICE in Connecticut: 2026 Update on Financial Hardship. United Way Connecticut.

[7] https://www.ctbar.org/events-education/upcoming-special-events/free-legal-advice-clinics

[8] https://ct.freelegalanswers.org

[9] https://www.ctbar.org/lawyers-in-libraries

[10] https://www.ctbar.org/members/professional-resources/lawyer-client-fee-dispute-resolution-program

[11] https://www.ctbar.org/public/pro-bono-legal-aid-services/bankruptcy-pro-bono-program





# Striving to Ensure Meaningful Access to Justice for All

By HON. WILLIAM H. BRIGHT, JR. AND JENN SHUKLA

*"Equal justice under the law is not merely a caption on the façade of the Supreme Court building, it is perhaps the most inspiring ideal in our society. It is one of the ends for which our entire legal system exists . . . it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status."— Lewis F. Powell*

Justice Powell's statement expresses a sentiment that motivated many of us to pursue a career in law. And it is a foundational principle that guides Connecticut's Judicial Branch in everything we do.

The challenge we face as judges and lawyers is how to make this aspiration a reality. In April 2011, then-Chief Justice Chase Rogers announced the Judicial Branch's establishment of Connecticut's Access to Justice (ATJ) Commission. Over the last fifteen years, the ATJ Commission has built on the Branch's efforts to ensure equal justice that have always been the core of its mission and have led Connecticut to be recognized as a national leader in several areas, including, among others, assistance to self-represented parties, interpretation and translation services, volunteer attorney programs, and funding legal aid. Just recently, the ATJ Commission and its partners have been recognized as national access to justice innovators and leaders in several notable ways: Connecticut's Civil Access to Justice Speaker Series was selected as the winner of the 2026 National Conference of Bar Foundations Partnership for Success Award; Connecticut was chosen to present at three sessions this year at the largest annual national access to justice conference; and the Judicial Branch was asked to help develop the National Center for Access to Justice's next Justice Index, which measures each state's access to justice efforts in several categories.

Despite such recognition and our considerable investment in ensuring meaningful access to justice, significant challenges remain and the ATJ Commission, which is comprised principally of volunteer judges, attorneys from legal aid, private practice and in-house positions, law school deans and professors, and several dedicated Judicial Branch staff, continues its work. With respect to challenges, figuring out how best to serve the number of self-represented parties that appear in court in civil matters is our biggest one. In 2025, 83 percent of family cases had at least one self-represented party. In eviction cases, over 90 percent of defendants are self-represented even with the state's implementation of a right to counsel program. By contrast, over 80 percent of landlords are represented by counsel. An even greater disparity exists in debt collection cases where, although over 90 percent of defendants are self-represented, almost all plaintiffs are represented by counsel. The large number of self-represented parties is not limited to cases in the trial court. At the Appellate Court, approximately 38 percent of all civil and family cases involve at least one self-represented party. These numbers present significant challenges for a legal system constructed by lawyers with the expectation that virtually all parties in a case would be represented by counsel.

The Judicial Branch and the ATJ Commission have taken a two-pronged approach to addressing this challenge. First, we have focused on efforts to increase representation of those who cannot afford to hire a lawyer. Second, for those who still cannot afford or do not have a lawyer, we have worked to make the legal system easier to navigate.

Image credit: DW labs Incorporated | AdobeStock

To increase representation, the Judicial Branch, working with our legislature, developed its Court Fees Grants-in-Aid (CFGIA) and Judicial Branch Grants-in-Aid (JBGIA) programs, that together provide Connecticut's legal aid organizations approximately $15 million dollars a year. Along with the legislature and the legal community, we also developed a limited right to counsel program to provide legal aid attorneys to some defendants in eviction matters.

The ATJ Commission's pro bono subcommittee works extensively with the private bar and in-house attorneys to increase the level of pro bono services provided to those in need. The Young Lawyers Section of the CBA has been particularly engaged with us in these efforts, and we look forward to expanding the impact of its efforts. To that end, the ATJ Commission, CBA, and Connecticut Bar Foundation are jointly developing a Pro Bono Academy to offer training and encouragement to newly admitted attorneys to help them meet the ethical obligation set forth in Rule 6.1 of Connecticut's Rules of Professional Conduct to "render public interest legal service."

Working with legal aid organizations, we have tried to eliminate barriers to attorneys providing pro bono services by developing training programs and providing a single portal where lawyers can find various pro bono opportunities across several legal aid providers. To find such opportunities, lawyers need only visit ctprobono.org.

The ATJ Commission also has worked with our Connecticut law schools, all of which have developed robust clinics to provide legal assistance to those in need.

Finally, the judges of the Superior Court have modified the rules of practice to: permit lawyers to enter a limited scope appearance to assist a litigant with a stage of a case without requiring the lawyer to make an open-ended commitment to the client, make it easier for in-house, retired, and out-of-state lawyers to engage in pro bono representation, and permit lawyers to count some of their pro bono hours towards their annual minimum Continuing Legal Education requirement. These efforts reflect our view that the system works best for all litigants when everyone is represented by counsel.

Nevertheless, we recognize that efforts to ensure that more litigants are represented will take time and are unlikely to reach all self-represented parties. For this reason, we continue to explore ways to make the judicial system easier to navigate for self-represented parties. We have one of the nation's most robust networks of court service centers and public information desks. Our dedicated court officers in those centers answer hundreds of thousands of questions each year from self-represented parties, assisting them in understanding the process and easing their anxiety. Our family, housing, and foreclosure mediators also work extensively with thousands of self-represented parties to help them resolve life-impacting legal problems. Our law librarians, who used to spend most of their time assisting lawyers in finding legal authorities, now spend most of their time helping self-represented parties in that task. Court Operations employees work tirelessly to make sure that our court forms and information resources are in easy-to-understand language and have developed a state-of-the-art call center that has handled millions of inquiries from Connecticut residents. And we have developed and implemented several volunteer attorney programs to assist self-represented parties with family law, foreclosure, small claims, and contract collection matters.

The ATJ Commission continues to build on these efforts in a number of ways. We, in collaboration with the Connecticut Bar Foundation, are piloting an eviction diversion program to help self-represented parties obtain legal advice and find resources that will allow them to stay in their homes. We are exploring ways to ensure that self-represented defendants in housing and debt collection cases understand the significance of the process served on them and what steps they need to take to defend themselves. We are providing training for local librarians on the Judicial Branch resources that are available to their patrons. And we are developing short-form videos to help people unfamiliar with our court building and procedures to understand how to navigate both.

To provide more information about our work and to seek input from our various partners, including members of the bar, the ATJ Commission is holding a free Access to Justice conference on November 4, 2026 at the Legislative Office Building in Hartford. The conference will include presentations on our current initiatives and inspirational and interesting speakers including United States Senator Chris Murphy and Chief Justice Raheem Mullins. Space for the conference is limited so I encourage anyone who is interested in attending to register early.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not note that the efforts of the Branch and the ATJ Commission to improve access to justice in Connecticut are only possible because of the commitment our Chief Justices and Chief Court Administrators have shown to the cause. Chief Justice Mullins and Justice Alexander continue to exemplify that commitment. Despite his full schedule, the Chief Justice traveled with us to the national Access to Justice conference last fall and he and Justice Alexander eagerly approved the hiring of Attorney Shukla as our first and only Judicial Branch staff dedicated to the ATJ Commission. By the way, if you would like to learn more about the work of the ATJ Commission or how to get involved, you can contact Jenn at jenn.shukla@jud.ct.gov.

We look forward to seeing you on November 4. ■

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***Hon. William H Bright, Jr.*** *is an Associate Justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court and the chair of the Connecticut Judicial Branch's Access to Justice Commission.*

***Jenn Shukla*** *is the Access to Justice Program Manager for the Connecticut Judicial Branch. Prior to joining the Judicial Branch, she served as the Director of Access to Justice Initiatives for the Connecticut Bar Association from 2021-2025.*

# The CBA Emeritus Pro Bono Program: Doing Great Things in Short Bursts

By TIMOTHY FISHER

Those of us nearing (or past) retirement age often look for ways to stay engaged with the practice of law. Among the most fulfilling opportunities are short-session pro bono engagements through the CBA's "Emeritus Pro Bono" initiative.

This program offers a rewarding and meaningful opportunity for *retired*, semi-retired, and other interested lawyers to stay connected and perform important public service. It entails limited scope representation, usually of 20 to 30 minutes, in person or by video. Our clients are from among the vast majority of Americans who as a practical matter could not get legal help in any other way.

## The Need

The need for this help is profound. Countless people encounter problems that can materially impair their lives and yet are beyond their skill or knowledge to solve on their own. In most of these cases the actual legal problem is simple, but the language of law and bureaucracies make it seem insurmountable. The amounts at stake are significant to the client but not enough to merit hourly billing rates and rarely would generate potential recoveries sufficient to justify contingency fees.

## The Clients

The people we serve are part of the ever-rising tide of pro se litigants in our court systems. While they are often a burden to the courts and difficult for opposing counsel, they themselves are the main victims of their lack of representation. More than anything, they need a thoughtful voice they can trust to explain their problem in lay terms and suggest paths forward to a solution.

For these thousands of people, pro bono representation is the only recourse. While legal aid providers do what they can, they are not funded to the level that could meet the need. Also, many matters do not match their service structure since so often the problems are relatively simple but do not merit the intake processes, staffing model, or strategies of legal aid organizations.

## The Programs

Several different programs operate with the CBA's Emeritus Pro Bono program. They vary in their service delivery modality:

- The CBA FREE LEGAL ADVICE CLINIC[1] operates entirely through zoom sessions. Clients provide written materials ahead of the scheduled consultation, so the pro bono lawyer can consider or research any questions they raise before the session.
- The LAWYERS IN LIBRARIES[2] program entails-in person sessions in various public libraries on scheduled weekday afternoons. There are no advance materials but the sign-up sheet indicates the nature of the client's legal problem.
- The JUDICIAL BRANCH VOLUNTEER LAWYER PROGRAM[3] is held in courthouses where clients come in and the lawyers join either by zoom or in person. The Judicial Branch organizes different sessions for the various major areas of legal problems among pro bono clients (small claims, collections, tenancy, family, etc.)
- FREE LEGAL ANSWERS[4] is an ABA sponsored program of asynchronous questions & answers: clients post questions on an online platform and participating lawyers log in to see what questions they can answer.
- The CBA FEE DISPUTE ADR[5] program provides mediation of fee disputes in cases where both sides agree to the process.

## Retirement Status, Malpractice & Training

The Judicial Branch and the CBA have taken steps to make it easy and safe for lawyers, retired or not, to participate.

- First, all of these programs operate under the limited scope representation provisions of Rule 1.2(c), which limits the lawyer's obligations to the short (20-30 minute) duration of the client conversation, without any ongoing duties.
- Second, the CBA provides a blanket malpractice policy for the CBA Free Legal Clinic, Lawyers in Libraries, and the Small Claims session of the Judicial VAP program. That policy covers any claims (of which there have been none in living memory). The ABA provides malpractice coverage for legal advice and guidance provided through the Free Legal Answers program.
- Third, retired lawyers under Rule 2.55(e), and those whose only bar admission was in another state under Rule 5.5(d), can practice law in this limited fashion without violating bar registration regulations or owing occupational fees.

Image credit: Maria Vitkovskai AdobeStock



Most of the lawyers who have worked in the Emeritus program have not practiced in the particular areas of law that these clients bring. In order to provide pro bono lawyers with a basic grasp of these fields the CBA offers webinar training sessions. Those are held live by zoom periodically, and there is a library of the past sessions that anyone can watch to come up to speed in the desired area.

All that said, we who volunteer find that we know enough to be helpful. If we know the area of law of the client's question in advance, we can do brief research to get the landscape of that field. Sometimes we do research on the fly with the client present during their session to nail down an important point. And we also can make "lifeline calls" to each other with a question when we are not yet confident in our answer. Also, the CBA Free Legal Advice Clinic, with its submission of materials ahead of time, and the Free Legal Answers with its asynchronous posted questions, give us the opportunity to do targeted research before engaging with the client, if we wish.

## The Value Proposition

Most of us who have worked in this program would say that we have never provided so much benefit to a client with so little effort and in such a brief use of our time. It is remarkable how much it can help someone to get simple assurances or guidance about a problem that frightens and confuses them. The gratitude we experience from these clients is immense though it may be the product of only 20 or 30 minutes of our time.

There is also a deep value on our side. Most of us have found success in our careers to the point of achieving some degree of material comfort, and few of us have faced the risk of great financial misfortune. It is easy sometimes to lose sight of what life is like in our country for the large portion of the population that lives without a financial margin of safety. The Emeritus Pro Bono program has given us a better grasp of the experience of the reality of living in this country, and a better understanding of the need for legal and social justice. As I've often said, I don't know if my pro bono work changed the lives of my clients, but I know that it changed me.

## Contact

The Connecticut Bar Association's Director of Access to Justice and Equity is Attorney Song Kim. Anyone interested in joining our merry band can email her at skim@ctbar.org. Tell her in your email what program you are interested in, and of any training you would like to draw upon. Song will then connect you with the sign-up process and any training material. She can also connect you with any of us who are currently doing this great work so we can offer guidance and answer any questions you may have. Please do consider joining us. ■

***Timothy Fisher*** *is the chair of CBA Emeritus Pro Bono Committee; Dean and Professor of Law Emeritus, University of Connecticut School of Law; and former President of the Connecticut Bar Foundation*

### NOTES

[1] https://www.ctbar.org/events-education/upcoming-special-events/free-legal-advice-clinics

[2] https://www.ctbar.org/lawyers-in-libraries

[3] https://www.jud.ct.gov/volunteer_atty_prgm.htm

[4] https://www.ctbar.org/public/pro-bono-legal-aid-services/ct-free-legal-answers

[5] https://www.ctbar.org/public/lawyer-client-fee-dispute-resolution-program

# Recognizing
# Pro Bono Service

The Connecticut Bar Association (CBA) proudly recognizes the hundreds of private attorneys, paralegals, law students, and other professionals who generously volunteered their time to provide free legal assistance to low-income Connecticut residents.

Listed below are the volunteers who participated in at least one of the following CBA pro bono programs during the 2025–2026 bar year: Bankruptcy Pro Bono Program, Free Legal Advice Clinics, Free Legal Answers, Lawyers in Libraries, and Lawyer-Client Fee Dispute Resolution Program.

We also extend our sincere thanks to the many other volunteers not listed here who provide pro bono services throughout Connecticut. Your commitment strengthens the legal profession, expands access to justice, and makes a meaningful difference in the lives of Connecticut residents.

Thank you for your service to the profession and to the people of Connecticut.

## Attorney Volunteers

Justin Ahern
John Aldrich
Jacob ("Jack") Alexander
Michael Anderson
Maggie L. Anderson-Murphy*
Greg Arcaro
Sabrina Arnold
David P. Atkins*
Nate Baber
Sage L. Bachmann
Janie Becker
Suzann Beckett
Peter W. Benner*
Kay Berris
Nicole Bikakis
Brittany Bisson
Kevin Black, Jr.
Michael Boardman
Katie L. Bordeau
D. Palm Bosso
John Bowser
Kayla Briere*
Robert Brody
Neil G. Brown
Dana Bucin
Audra Buckland
Meghan Buckley
James R. Byrne*
Richard D. Carella
Greg Carnese
Kathleen Cason
Joseph ("Joe") Cherico
Ronald Chorches
Barbara Collins
Mike Conroy
Robin Cotler
Patrick Coughlin
Richard Croce
Cynthia Crockett
Celina B. Curillo
Jeffrey Curtin
Robert Curzan
Robert Cushman
Joe D'agostino
Erin M. Daly*
Jenya H. Damsky
Ann-Marie DeGraffenreidt
Theresa DeGray
Cassandra Devaney
Bill Dezinno
Matthew N. Diamond
Wendy DiChristina
James Dobson
Shana L. Dowty
Mark Dumas
Garlinck Dumont
Jake Dunigan
Jaime Dursht*
Rochelle C. Duyan
Deborah Eisenberg
Paula Elfont*
Robert Elfont*
Leopold DeFusco
Catherine A. Falvey
Dale C. Faulkner
Joanne Faulkner
Candace Fay
Vasiliki Filippakos
Marc Finer
Timothy Fisher
Kathleen M. Flaherty
Jill Flanigan*
Nicole A. Fluckiger
Chris Folsom
Milagros Fonseca
Dahlia M. French
Jonathan Friedler
Lorraine Galvis
Paul Garlinghouse
Rachel S. Garron*
Christopher Gelino
Sarah Gersten
Alena Gfeller
Kialeigh Gill
Andrew Glass
Joel Grafstein
Gary Greene
Angela Haen
Rose Haseltine
Joshua A. Hawks-Ladds*
Brian G. Hayes
Abram Heisler
Mike Hespeler
Alanna Hodgson
Eric Hoffman
Dan Horgan*
Claire Howard
Jenna Hyler
Samim Jabarkhail
Rishita Jani
Ron Japha*
Edward Jurkiewicz
Jen Karr
Andrew Keller*
Megan Kelly
Michael Kennedy
Haseeb Khan*

Song Kim
Andrew S. Knott
Neil Kraner
Mark Kratter
Kyle LaBuff*
Greta LaFleur
Paul A. Lagasse*
Francis Lamboley
Rachel Lang
Trevor Larrubia*
Melissa A. Lauretti
Peter Lawrence
John Letizia
Matthew Lewicki
Houston P. Lowry*
Kirk Lowry
Richard M. Lucas*
Bhanuka Mahabamunuge
Vianca Malick
Bonnie Mangan
Robyn Mann
Hope K. Marino
David J. Markowitz
Randall McHugh*
Lauren McNamara
Maggie B. Mehic
Andrea Melanson
Ellen Messali
Amy Lin Meyerson
David Moore
Magdalena Greene Morales
Vivian M. Moreno-Zelinka
Samantha Morton
James Motes
Jim Motes
Anna Kate Munsey
Paul Murray
Robert Murray
Kevin Musco
Basam Nabulsi
Sam Nassetaa
Donald Neville
Kara Newell
Deborah Noonan
Daryll Odierna
Erin O'Neil-Baker
Jonathan Orell
Nicholas Ouellette
Daniel Pagana
Ashley E. Palma
Vanitha Patil
Piper A. Paul
Rebecca Perra
Don Philips
Heather Pina
Jose Pol*
Sarah Poriss
Eric Posmantier
Sikandar Rana
Stephen Reck
Robert Reeve*
Channing G. Reeves
Sylvia Reid
Ashley Rivera
Dale Roberson
Ellen Roberts
Bharbara Rocha
Steven R. Rolnick
Joseph Romanello
Allison M. Ruiz
Jasjeet Sahani
Gabriela Sandoval
Jeremy T. Sauer*
Alice B. Sawyer
Roger Scully
Collin J. Seguin*
James Shea
Gary F. Sheldon*
Sanya Siddiqui
Melvin Simon
Annecca Smith
Mark R. Soboslai
Jaeden C. Spitale
Jonathan Spodnick
Jim Stark
William D. Stempel*
Pamela C. Stevenson*
Joe Strafaci
Stephen Sztaba
Dylan Takores
Chris Thogmartin
Tamara Titre
Alison J. Toumekian
Blake Turley
Paige Vaillancourt
Isabel V. Del Vecchio
Breana Vessichio
Valerie Votto
Greg Wagman
Philip Walker
George Weber
Jon Weiner*
Lisa K. Wexler
Eric W. Wiechmann
Nancy Wilkenfeld*
Thomas Wilkeson
Susan Williams
Ryan Zajic
Benjamin ("Jay") Zelermyer
Tianyi Zhang

*Denotes over 10 pro bono hours

Russell Zimberlin
Kyle Zrenda

## Law Student Volunteers

Akansha Gupta
Amanda Cordone
Anastasija Piazenko
Arielle Bailey
Betsy DeBlieux
Brianna Wilkes
Caroline Potter
Chulani Sterling
Cierra McLaurin
Deborah Oyedele
Devin Moniz
Edward Osborne
Elizabeth (Bola) Cole
Elizabeth Okeleke
Fenny Kang
Funke Madariola
Haley Anderson
Haley Pulver
Hamdi Mohamed
Haniya Jaffery
Isaac Graham
Jaclyn Curcio
Jenya Damsky
Jessica Gambino
Joseph Sorrell
Karina (Mayra) Lopez-Capa
Kathryn Lewis
Kristen Perez-Wilson
Kyleigh Sisk
Lauryn Flowers
Layne Stevens
Leah Champagne
Lily Sabrini
Lily Sanderson
Logan Ward
Marc Goldner
Maria Brighenti-Gregoire
Maria Naqvi
Matthew Pascal
Meghan Thornton
Meredith Bayliss
Mykai Eastman
Olga Bakshtanovskaya
Royanne Richards
Shania Sohota
Sidney-Marie Bellinger
Stephanie Auerbach
Subrian Myrie Francis
Tenneille McFarlane-Smar
Tiffany Araujo
Tiffany Dzolota
Yeraida Reinheimer
Zoila J. Espionza

# Pro Bono
# Volunteer Spotlights

"I grew up in a town without lawyers and in a family that couldn't afford them. My mother self-represented herself numerous times on child support matters. My goal is to provide the access to counsel that my mother deserved. People come into my office all the time unable to afford my services. That's not the way it should be, and it's a privilege to play my role in giving back to my community."

—**Jaeden C. Spitale,** *Associate Attorney, Diana, Conti, Tunila, Sheridan & McCann, LLP*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Volunteer Attorney Program, Free Legal Answers

"Providing pro bono advice as a new member of the bar was equal parts terrifying, frustrating, and incredibly rewarding.

I initially participated in the program to adhere to Justice Mullins' call that we exemplify the ideal of public service and to honor my father, who has welcomed me into his practice, and is a lifetime believer in supporting pro bono and charitable initiatives. Frankly, I don't understand how an attorney could join the bar and not feel compelled to participate.

I have continued to serve this program, despite the fact that I often want to rush home to my cat and couch, because it has been a balm for my imposter syndrome. To bear witness to the participants' struggles without having a clear answer or ideas for next steps forward is truly scary and upsetting. However, consulting on matters outside of my practice area and having to say "I don't know" even when it hurt helped me gain confidence, learn how to be more honest and direct with the clients, and taught me how to say no very firmly—a skill that all lawyers need, but no law school class teaches! It was also humbling and inspiring because the participants truly value your time and energy and count on you as a trusted community member—regardless of whether they walk away with an answer or not."

—**Rachel Lang,** *Attorney, Lang and Corona, P.C.*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries, Free Legal Advice Clinic

"My Catholic faith has taught me that when I am able to serve others, I should. Through the CBA's pro bono programs, I have the privilege of offering legal guidance to people in my community who may not otherwise have access to it. What I find most meaningful is many people simply want to be heard. They arrive feeling unheard or overwhelmed by a dispute or difficult situation. Taking the time to listen, helping them understand their options, and making them feel their concerns matter, can be incredibly powerful. Practicing law is a privilege, and pro bono service is a meaningful reminder to stay humble, use that privilege responsibly, and treat every person with dignity."

—**Lorraine Galvis,** *Founding Partner, Galvis & Co.*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries, Free Legal Advice Clinic

"The program was conscientiously constructed and the administrative subcommittee takes care that it evolves to meet current needs. It provides individuals with direct access to attorneys specializing in bankruptcy law, ensuring they have quality representation to provide them with a fresh financial start. You can see the client's relief even just at the end of a consultation and these have been some of my most fulfilling cases."

—**Paige M. Vaillancourt,** *Partner, Rescia Vaillancourt, P.C.*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Bankruptcy Pro Bono, Free Legal Advice Clinic, Lawyers in Libraries, Lawyers in Classrooms

"I really do love the Free Legal Advice Clinic and Lawyers in Libraries. Too often, people go without legal help simply because they think they can't afford it. Programs like this matter—they make sure people can access real advice early, when it can actually change the outcome."

—**Erin Daly,** *Founder and Attorney, Daly Law & Strategy*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries, Free Legal Advice Clinic

"My name is Kayla and I am an immigration attorney. I currently volunteer with the Lawyers in Libraries program and the Free Legal Advice Clinic. I am grateful for the opportunity to volunteer through both programs. As a new attorney, they are invaluable learning experiences.

One of the reasons pro bono work is so meaningful to me is that immigration law is an area where misinformation and fraud are unfortunately very common. Many people seeking legal help are in vulnerable situations and are desperate for answers. I value the opportunity to provide accurate information about legitimate immigration options, or, when appropriate, to honestly explain that there is not a viable legal pathway available. Even when the answer is not what someone hopes to hear, having accurate information can help protect them from individuals who would otherwise exploit them by charging money for false hope and false promises.

I also appreciate how well organized the CBA's pro bono programs are. The process makes volunteering incredibly accessible. As attorneys, we really just let them know when we are available and show up to help. The administrative support behind the scenes allows us to focus entirely on serving the community.

My personal participation also wouldn't be possible without my amazing employer, Norte Immigration Law, where I am encouraged to participate in these programs and even accommodated when they are during the workday."

—**Kayla Briere,** *Attorney, Norte Immigration Law*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries, Free Legal Advice Clinic

"Volunteering in the Connecticut Bar Association's Lawyers in Libraries program is one of the most rewarding ways I serve my community. As an attorney and public servant, I believe we have a duty to use our skills to open doors for others. Pro bono initiatives like Lawyers in Libraries play a vital role in increasing access to justice, especially for those who might not otherwise know where to turn. Volunteering allows me to connect directly with members of the Greater Bridgeport community, empowering residents to face complex legal challenges with clarity and confidence. To me, this program represents our profession at its finest — meeting people where they are with compassion, dignity, and respect."

—**Tamara Titre,** *Deputy Claims Commissioner, State of Connecticut*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries

"Even before my career started in the law I'd been a true believer in a system that strives for fairness and justice. There are a lot of barriers to those fair outcomes in the modern courts, but I still believe the intent is there. The clinic gives me a chance to bring that faith to one more person. A slow and steady march toward justice for all that I am proud to be a part of."

—**Jake Dunigan,** *Founder and Attorney, Dunigan Law, PLLC*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Free Legal Advice Clinic, Lawyers in Libraries

"I felt like an emergency room doctor: a quick diagnosis, stabilize the client's situation, give a prediction of likely path and outcomes, and steer them toward more sustainable support.

Each person comes to these brief meetings with a unique story. Each of them needs and deserves understanding and support, no matter what the origin of their problems or the ease of a solution.

It's so fulfilling to be able to give so much value in such a modest period of time.

The CBA staff does a great job framing up the conversation to be as efficient and as possible; their intake memo and client documentation enable us to get to the point quickly.

My pro bono clients don't always wrap up our sessions happy, but they are always grateful."

—**Tim Fisher,** *Dean and Professor of Law Emeritus, University of Connecticut School of Law*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Free Legal Advice Clinic, Free Legal Answers, Lawyers in Libraries



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"Pro bono work is about showing up for your community. There are people in every neighborhood who have real legal problems like a veteran facing eviction, someone being hounded by debt collectors, or someone who needs advice on a restraining order. Most of the time, these people simply don't know that help is available or how to find it. The most important thing I can do as a lawyer is meet those people where they are, cut through the confusion, and provide the guidance that sets them on the right path. Pro bono work is how I make my community better."

—**Trevor J. Larrubia,** Attorney, The Pickel Law Firm, LLC
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries, Connecticut Veterans Legal Center

"The practice of law is more than a profession, it is a public trust. Pro bono service is one of the clearest ways we honor that trust by helping ensure that access to justice is not reserved only for those who can afford it."

—**P. Hoffman,** *Founder & CEO, AI Esquire, Inc.*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries, Free Legal Answers

"Being a lawyer is a privilege. I participate in the Lawyers in Libraries program because it feels meaningful to offer guidance to others in the community and help relieve some of the pressure they face when dealing with unfamiliar legal issues."

—**Joseph Cherico,** *Partner, McCarter & English*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries

"Through the CBA's pro bono programs, I've had the privilege of serving as a mock trial judge in Danbury and volunteering with Lawyers in Libraries. I'm especially proud of launching the Lawyers in Libraries location last year in New Milford, where we've provided legal guidance to over 50 friends and neighbors across a wide range of issues. I'm looking forward to reaching even more community members this year and hopeful about launching another location in Litchfield County soon!"

—**Paula P. Elfont,** *Managing Partner, Guendelsberger Law Offices, LLP*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries

"I participate in pro bono work because it's a calling. There is a need—volunteerism is down nationwide. In addition, when I started out, obviously, I didn't have any experience, and pro bono work gave me an opportunity to practice various substantive law and learn client management techniques. To be transparent—it is also just fun to do! You never know exactly what legal issue and personality you are going to get with a client, and I can't accurately express how grateful people are for the help of the volunteers. If that isn't enough, studies show that when one volunteers, their blood pressure decreases, their immune system is boosted and longevity increases. It has been a highlight of my legal career and I'm grateful for the CBA for providing me with opportunities to participate."

—**Kyle LaBuff,** *Assistant State's Attorney, Medicaid Fraud Control Unit*
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries

"I volunteer with the Connecticut Bar Association's Lawyers in Libraries program at the Public Library of New London, providing free 20-minute pro bono legal consultations to community members on issues including landlord-tenant disputes, family law, immigration, employment, consumer rights, and personal injury. Meeting clients in a trusted public space allows me to deliver practical, accessible legal advice to people who otherwise lacked access to counsel. It is incredibly fulfilling and brings a great feeling to know I'm helping people navigate important legal challenges while strengthening my skills in client interviewing, issue-spotting, and clear communication under time constraints."

—**Nancy Wilkenfeld**
CBA Pro Bono Programs: Lawyers in Libraries

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# The Pro Bono Director Becomes the Pro Bono Volunteer: *Lessons from the Asylum Project*

By ASHLEIGH M. BACKMAN

For years, I encouraged others to take the leap into pro bono work—step outside their comfort zones and see how an attorney's skills help those unable to access legal representation. I said pro bono service changes lives. What I didn't realize was how profoundly it would change *mine*.

When I signed up as a volunteer attorney with the Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants (CIRI), I wasn't giving the orientation or pairing lawyers with clients. This time, I was sitting in the training, learning a new area of law, feeling that same mix of excitement and anxiety that volunteers describe.

I represented Afghan refugees seeking asylum—families fleeing unimaginable circumstances and trying to find safety in the United States. Asylum law was outside my practice area. Even after years of championing pro bono work, fear of the unknown is real. Stepping outside our expertise can feel risky—for the client, our reputation, and our confidence.

But I was provided with everything I needed to succeed: substantive training, detailed resources, and experienced immigration attorney mentors (thank you, Prof. Jon Bauer & Prof. Sheila Hayre!). With that safety net, I saw what I've always told others: pro bono work doesn't require being an expert in a new field. It requires being a good listener, a careful advocate, and a compassionate human. Technical skills can be learned; empathy and commitment make the difference.

## The Impact of Our Work

Representing Afghan clients is a profound experience. These families are rebuilding their lives and placing extraordinary trust in our legal system. As I guided them through the asylum process, I was learning just as much as I was giving. *The teacher had become the student.* I learned about the law, but also about patience and the quiet strength of our vulnerable clients.

When their cases concluded, I carried with me a renewed sense of what our profession can do through service.

## Coming Full Circle

Becoming a volunteer after years of leading pro bono programs gave me a new appreciation for both sides. The infrastructure of support—mentorship, training, translation, insurance—matters immensely. It transforms "I don't think I can" into "I know I can." It also reminded me why I fell in love with our profession.

Pro bono service reflects something special about our profession: the ability to use our legal skills to ensure that access to justice is not limited to those who can afford it. Right now, our Connecticut communities need volunteer lawyers. Whether it's representing an asylum seeker, helping a tenant avoid eviction, or guiding a veteran through benefits claims, your expertise changes the trajectory of someone's life.

A free defensive asylum 101 training during National Pro Bono Week hosted by James W. Cooper Fellows, Quinnipiac University School of Law, New Haven Legal Assistance Association, and Connecticut Bar Association offers an opportunity to get started. Come, learn, and take the leap—say yes to pro bono.

Connecticut's pro bono programs provide the tools, clients and support. All that's missing is you. ■

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***Ashleigh M. Backman*** *is an attorney, former Pro Bono Director, James W. Cooper Fellow, and Deputy Director & Chief Operating Officer of the Connecticut Bar Foundation. Her career has focused on expanding access to justice and strengthening pro bono legal services. The views expressed are her own.*

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# Connecticut Veterans Legal Center
# Upholding Our Obligation to Those Who've Served

By DONALD TUTSON, JR.

Volunteering to serve in the military in order to uphold our Constitution and to secure our collective wellbeing is a noble choice. In Connecticut, over 130,000 of our neighbors have done just that. Providing a reciprocal commitment to these Veterans is something that *Connecticut Veterans Legal Center* (CVLC) does every day, and we can use your help.

CVLC's mission is to empower, support, and improve the lives of Connecticut Veterans by providing free legal assistance to help them overcome legal barriers to housing, healthcare, income, and recovery. We have eleven staff attorneys and a twelve-member support team working in four locations throughout Connecticut. Last year, CVLC served over 1,800 Veterans, and our attorneys worked on 868 legal cases. We helped secure $3.2 million in lump sum financial payments to our clients and 80% had positive outcomes in their housing matters. (see link: ctveteranslegal.org/ourimpact).

Our success relies heavily upon the generosity of the volunteer attorneys who have joined our *Pro Bono Partner Network*. Here Volunteers are assigned to represent Veterans in the same legal subject areas as our staff attorneys. Those include housing defense (evictions, landlord-tenant disputes), debt relief, discharge upgrades, VA benefit access and denials, and more.

The Network is open to all licensed attorneys in Connecticut and becoming a Volunteer is simple. Our program allows Volunteers to accept assignments on a flexible basis, and they can be sure CVLC has completed a thorough, two-step screening and intake process before a case assignment is made. As cases advance, CVLC Staff attorneys remain available to provide Volunteers with assistance; and we are available to confirm pro bono hours as needed for Volunteers seeking MCLE credits (see link: ctveteranslegal.org/probono).

Before joining CVLC as the organization's Pro Bono Coordinator, I was a Volunteer attorney. But in 2012 when I started, I recall being hesitant to sign on because I was busy with a solo practice and felt I didn't have the right skills to actually help a struggling Veteran. However, once I took a minute to get over myself, I made a simple call and signed up. CVLC promptly asked me to take a case and the positive experiences I had were transformative and immediate.

One of my first cases was for Veteran Mr. F. who was facing eviction after spending years in the same rental home. My work amounted to a few weeks of otherwise unremarkable negotiations with a landlord's attorney. However, our amicable resolution ultimately allowed the Veteran and his wife to vacate the property efficiently and simultaneously complete the very stressful process of purchasing their first home. They have been happy, independent and secure homeowners for 15 years, but I still hear from this special Veteran on my birthday. While I can't guarantee all Pro Bono Partners will have similar results, I do assure them that the annual birthday calls are worth more than any fee I've ever received.

Please contact Don Tutson to learn more about CVLC, our Pro Bono Partnership and how you can start helping a Veteran today. ■

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***Donald Tutson, Jr.,*** *Pro Bono Coordinator, Connecticut Veterans Legal Center Inc. Don has been practicing law in Connecticut since 1997 and was both a CVLC volunteer attorney and former member of CVLC's Board of Directors prior to joining the organization as a staff attorney in 2023.*

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# Pro Bono Attorneys Can Help Expand Access to Justice Through the Vernon Pilot Program

By ANNE LOUISE BLANCHARD

Every day, Connecticut residents face the possibility of losing their homes because they cannot afford legal representation in eviction proceedings. For many, the consequences of eviction extend far beyond housing instability—they can lead to job loss, disruptions in children's education, declining health, and long-term financial hardship. In March 2026, Connecticut Legal Services (CLS) launched the Vernon Housing Court Pilot Program to connect tenants with legal assistance at one of the most critical moments in the eviction process: the day they appear in court.

The pilot program, based at Rockville Housing Court in the Tolland Judicial District, is designed to meet tenants where they are. On Fridays, CLS attorneys and legal assistants are available to screen eligible individuals, provide legal advice, negotiate with landlords' counsel, and, when appropriate, enter full representation. The program also works to connect eligible tenants with financial assistance that can resolve rental arrears and preserve tenancies whenever possible.

The early success of the Vernon Pilot Program demonstrates the difference legal representation can make. Even limited legal assistance can help tenants understand their rights, negotiate realistic payment agreements, avoid default judgments, and, in many cases, remain safely housed. As demand for services continues to grow, expanding the program through the support of volunteer attorneys offers an exciting opportunity to increase its reach and impact.

Pro bono attorneys can play a vital role in helping families navigate the eviction process. Volunteers may assist with client interviews, explain court procedures, negotiate settlements, draft agreements, or provide limited representation during housing court proceedings. Whether an attorney has years of housing law experience or none at all, there is a meaningful role to play.

Connecticut Legal Services will provide the training, resources, and ongoing mentorship needed for volunteers to feel confident and prepared. Attorneys do not need prior experience in landlord-tenant law to participate. CLS staff will provide training on Connecticut housing law.

Throughout each volunteer's service, CLS attorneys will remain available to answer questions, and provide guidance.

Volunteering with the Vernon Pilot Program offers attorneys an opportunity to make an immediate and measurable difference in their communities. A relatively small investment of time can help prevent homelessness, stabilize families, reduce the strain on social service systems, and improve the efficiency of court proceedings. It is also an opportunity for attorneys to develop new advocacy skills, gain courtroom experience, and fulfill their professional commitment to public service.

The Vernon Pilot Program reflects a collaborative approach to expanding access to justice through early intervention, community partnerships, and dedicated legal advocacy. By joining this effort, pro bono attorneys become part of a team committed to ensuring that financial hardship does not prevent individuals from receiving meaningful legal assistance when they need it most.

Together, Connecticut Legal Services and the private bar can strengthen access to justice for vulnerable tenants, preserve housing stability, and build stronger communities—one family, one case, and one volunteer at a time.

If you are interested in volunteering with the Vernon Pilot Program, please contact CLS Managing Attorney Jane Kelleher at: JKelleher@ctlegal.org. ■

***Anne Louise Blanchard*** *is the Executive Director of Connecticut Legal Services and has served at the organization for more than 35 years.*



# Pro Bono Partnership: A Trusted Resource for Discrete and Meaningful Transactional Pro Bono Opportunities

By LISA BRODER

For nearly three decades, Pro Bono Partnership has made it simple, rewarding, and impactful for attorneys to provide quality transactional pro bono legal services to local nonprofit organizations. In 2025, Pro Bono Partnership staff, volunteers, and supporters assisted nearly 1,000 nonprofit clients on more than 2,200 legal matters, contributing over $32 million in value to nonprofits in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York.

## Supporting Nonprofits That Strengthen Communities

Pro Bono Partnership, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, serves charitable organizations that address critical community needs. Our clients feed the hungry, house the homeless, protect the civil rights of individuals, promote the arts, protect the environment, and provide essential programs to, among others, children, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, the unemployed, survivors of domestic or sexual abuse, immigrants, and veterans.

Like for-profit companies, nonprofits face complex business legal issues, but many lack the resources to obtain legal counsel without diverting funds from their mission and may not recognize when legal guidance is needed. By connecting these organizations with skilled volunteer attorneys, we help nonprofits navigate legal challenges, reduce risk, and operate more effectively.

## Meaningful, Manageable Pro Bono Work Designed for Busy Attorneys

Our volunteers are matched with projects that align with their expertise so that they can focus on what they do best. There is no substantive training required. Opportunities include contracts, corporate governance, employment law, real estate, intellectual property, privacy and HIPAA compliance, tax-exempt and nonprofit matters, mergers, dissolutions, and other transactional legal projects. Many engagements can be completed in a few hours yet deliver lasting value to organizations.

Our volunteer opportunities are tailored to suit the talents and needs of busy attorneys.

**Efficient:** Matters are screened, discrete, manageable, and generally not time-sensitive

**Flexible:** Work can be completed remotely

**Support:** Model documents and other resources are available

**Expertise:** A Pro Bono Partnership staff attorney experienced in nonprofit law oversees every matter

**Teamwork:** When appropriate, we can pair counsel to work together

**Peace of Mind:** We provide liability insurance coverage for all volunteer attorneys

## Earn MCLE Credit While Volunteering with Pro Bono Partnership

Connecticut now allows attorneys to earn minimum continuing legal education (MCLE) credit for qualifying pro bono service through organizations such as Pro Bono Partnership. Our volunteers may receive one hour of MCLE credit for every three hours of pro bono legal work performed, up to a maximum of six MCLE credit hours per calendar year.

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Image credit: Art Wager | Getty Images

# Pro Bono Civil Litigators Protect Tenants

By GIOVANNA SHAY

When McCarter & English attorneys Snigdha Mamillapalli and Jane Warren agreed to take on a housing conditions case pro bono from Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA) in fall 2025, the rat infestation in the client's Hartford apartment was so bad that the young mother and her children had taken refuge in their car. The McCarter team litigated the case for about nine months while the City of Hartford continued to cite the landlord for the poor conditions. McCarter succeeded in defeating an attempt by the landlord to exclude evidence of damage to the tenant's personal property. Ultimately, the case settled and the client was overjoyed.

Hartford tenants face rising housing costs and conditions problems, often involving out-of-state landlords. This year the *Hartford Courant* reported that Hartford has one of the state's highest rates of tenant displacement by fire, in part due to conditions issues that are not addressed by landlords, such as faulty wiring. See Angela Eichhorst & Mariana Navarette Villegas, Hartford Courant, *Thousands Displaced by Fires in One CT City in Less Than 6 Years*, May 31, 2026.

Connecticut's housing conditions statute, Section 47a-14h, provides an important tool to address poor conditions, permitting tenants to file streamlined actions and pay their rent into court while they mediate and/or seek court orders to improve conditions. The rent paid into court can then be disbursed pursuant to the parties' agreement or court's order.

Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA) attorneys advise tenants and handle payment into court actions for Hartford tenants with the support of a grant from the City of Hartford. As part of its Hartford conditions initiative, GHLA provides training and support to civil litigators from McCarter & English, who have accepted conditions cases pro bono. These cases are a good fit for civil litigators, who can use their skills in discovery and mediation to improve housing conditions and protect tenants.

McCarter & English partner Attorney Jane Warren says of the pro bono experience: "It was so gratifying on two fronts: First, to see this client's life transformed from the despair of being homeless for months because her apartment was unlivable due to the rat infestation and so many other hazards that the landlord had ignored despite repeated pleas. And second, to watch our associate blossom while learning to interact compassionately with our client, and at the same time, sternly and effectively with opposing counsel; writing compelling briefs; and persuasively arguing in court. Her win on the Motion in Limine resulted in the first offer of settlement, which she then negotiated upwards almost 40%, thereby helping our client start a new chapter."

Law firms interested in similar training in payment into court actions are welcome to contact Litigation & Advocacy Director Giovanna Shay at Greater Hartford Legal Aid at 860-541-5061 or gshay@ghla.org. ■

*__Giovanna Shay__ is the Litigation & Advocacy Director at Greater Hartford Legal Aid.*

## How to Get Involved and Help Expand Access to Transactional Pro Bono Services

- Apply to become a volunteer attorney by completing our online form: probonopartner.org/attorneys volunteers/become-a-volunteer-attorney. Signing up does not obligate you to volunteer; it enables you to receive our bimonthly email of volunteer opportunities.
- View the current list of Volunteer Opportunities on our wesite: probonopartner.org/attorneys-volunteers/volunteer-opportunities. Filter by location, practice area, and organization type to find opportunities that match individual interests and expertise.
- Follow us on social media.
- Learn more about Pro Bono Partnership at probonopartner.org/attorneys-volunteers/become-a-volunteer-attorney ■

*__Lisa Broder__ is the Pro Bono Manager at Pro Bono Partnership, Inc. As Pro Bono Manager, Lisa's primary areas of focus are cultivating and managing Pro Bono Partnership's relationships with corporations and law firms and recruiting volunteer attorneys to assist the Partnership's nonprofit clients. She also coordinates volunteer recognition and develops strategies to improve the Partnership's pro bono program.*




# Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut is Celebrating 30 Years!

By ERICA L. BASOLI

For thirty years, Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut (SLS) has been on the front lines of bringing access to justice to thousands of Connecticut residents living in poverty. Each year, our dedicated team of lawyers and paralegals help thousands of low-income individuals who are facing life-altering legal issues that affect their access to basic living needs—food, income, shelter, and protection from abuse.

To celebrate this landmark year, SLS is launching its "30 for 30" campaign. Through this promotion, SLS will recruit 30 attorney volunteers to serve as ambassadors and pledge to raise at least $30 from their peer networks to celebrate and support our organization. Each volunteer will be provided a fundraising "tool kit" to assist with their efforts.

Donations will go towards the important services that SLS provides to the low-income population, including supporting our comprehensive statewide pro bono program, which uses volunteer participation from the private bar, law schools, and paralegal associations to increase our program capacity and enhance our service delivery system.

Many of SLS' pro bono opportunities offer a lot of flexibility. Volunteers choose the types of cases they wish to accept and determine their own availability. Cases are never assigned without the attorney's consent. In 2025, 80 volunteer attorneys donated over 500 hours of pro bono assistance to almost 300 clients through the avenues listed below.

## Call 4 Law

Volunteer attorneys provide telephone advice to callers facing debt-related issues by assessing the caller's financial circumstances, evaluating potential exposure to debt collection actions, and determining whether the caller may be an appropriate candidate for Chapter 7 bankruptcy relief.

Quote from a Volunteer from our Call 4 Law program: "After our discussions, these individuals are more confident and empowered in how they are going to approach their situation and are extremely relieved to hear of the protections under the law, often brought to tears demonstrating the level of angst they have been experiencing. As a result of my work through SLS, clients are often able to settle out of court resulting in better results for them and relieving the burden on the legal and social services systems."

## Security Deposit and Divorce Clinics

Volunteer attorneys meet with clients, either virtually or in person, to assist with preparing court forms for small claims seeking the return of security deposits or the forms needed to be filed for uncontested divorce proceedings. The volunteer's role is limited to the clinic appointment and assistance with form completion and filing instructions.

## Custody Connect Clinic

After being awarded a grant to launch a pilot of this program, SLS will assist clients in initiating custody and visitation actions. Volunteers help clients complete the required court forms, either virtually or in person.

## Case Success Story

For our client "David," an expert and caring pro bono attorney did more than resolve a debt collection problem. His efforts preserved a year's worth of hard-earned savings and, most importantly, helped him keep his home. You see, the timing could not have been worse for David, who lives on a limited income, after a creditor garnished money from his bank account following a judgment against him. For nearly a year David had fallen behind

Image credit: sharafmaksumov | AdobeStock



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on his mortgage. Nonetheless, he had been carefully saving enough money to reinstate his mortgage and save his home from foreclosure. Before he could make the payment, the creditor's garnishment swept away those savings—once again putting his home at risk. Fortunately, David contacted SLS. What began as a Call 4 Law matter became much more when a volunteer Pro Bono attorney agreed to represent David directly. Recognizing what was at stake, the attorney negotiated with the creditor and succeeded in securing the return of the garnished funds. Going above and beyond, the attorney researched additional resources and options to help David maintain financial stability in the future. Armed with new information, and with his savings restored, David was able to reinstate his mortgage, keep his home, and build towards a more secure and stress free life.

## Get Involved

Attorneys interested in volunteering may apply through the CT Pro Bono portal: https://app.joinpaladin.com/!/statewide-legal-services-of-ct/opportunities. ■

*Erica L. Basoli is the Director of the Pro Bono Unit at Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut.*

# New Haven Legal Assistance and the Critical Role of Pro Bono

By ALEXIS SMITH

Justice Lewis F. Powell said, "*Equal justice under law is not merely a caption on the facade of the Supreme Court building, it is perhaps the most basic ideal of American society... It is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, to all.*"

Every day, hundreds of Connecticut residents face legal problems which can shape the course of their lives. In fact, 72 percent of low-income households in our state face one or more legal problems a year. That is 400,000 families. Someone at risk of losing their home, a family engaged in a custody dispute, a sudden loss of income, overwhelming debt, and domestic abuse are all issues affecting where people live, how they support their families, if they feel safe, and their ability to stabilize their lives.

Unlike the criminal justice system, there is no constitutional right to a court-appointed lawyer in most civil matters. Having a lawyer increases the likelihood someone has fair access to the legal system to preserve their basic human needs—shelter, income, and safety. As an example, people represented by a lawyer in immigration court are almost three times as likely to have a successful outcome. With 40,000 cases currently pending in Hartford immigration court, the need for legal representation is significant. As another example, housing disputes make up about 40 percent of civil legal needs in the state. Ninety percent of landlords are represented in these cases, as compared to about 15 percent of tenants. Having attorney representation balances the power for tenants as they navigate the complex housing court system, while dramatically reducing unlawful evictions, preventing homelessness, and stabilizing local communities.

The legal aid network represents thousands of individuals and families each year, however, the need is greater than what it has the capacity to fully meet. Pro Bono attorneys can fill a critical justice gap and ensure individuals and families do not navigate life-altering legal processes alone. The economic impact of providing attorneys for clients facing these matters is also critical, as resolving civil legal issues saves state resources in emergency housing, healthcare, and social services. By engaging in pro bono work, attorneys can demonstrate their dedication to the rule of law and the administration of justice.

Pro Bono work allows us to live into Justice Powell's vision for justice, by ensuring everyone has access to the legal system which makes our communities safer and stronger for all.

To learn about pro bono opportunities across practice areas and to volunteer with New Haven Legal Assistance, email Alexis Smith at ASmith@nhlegal.org. ■

*Alexis Smith is the Executive Director of New Haven Legal Assistance.*

# Small Time Commitment—Big Impact: The Judicial Branch's Volunteer Attorney Programs

By NICOLE COLLINS AND ROSE ANN RUSH

Each year, tens of thousands of people appear in Connecticut courts without a lawyer. Many of those individuals cannot afford to hire an attorney and have tried—without success—to get legal aid or other legal help. It can be frustrating and scary to try to enforce one's legal rights in a system designed for lawyers. The CT Judicial Branch, through its Volunteer Attorney Programs (VAP) and other efforts, is working to make it easier for people to navigate the legal system. Since 2010, the VAPs have helped guide over 20,000 people through complex processes.

The CT Judicial Branch's VAPs[1] cover four areas of law: contract collections, family law, foreclosure, and small claims matters. Individuals that don't have an attorney and want some legal guidance about one of these four areas can come to a courthouse near them. They check in with the Court Service Center during a prescheduled two-hour time block. The individuals are then connected with a volunteer attorney via Microsoft Teams. The attorney meets virtually with each participant one-on-one for about 15-20 minutes. Often, participants have questions about court processes such as how to obtain discovery or admit evidence; sometimes, individuals want assistance decoding the legal terms in a court notice or interpreting a complex law or rule. Individuals served through the VAPs often report feeling more ready to navigate court processes or tackle a complex issue after their attorney meeting.

The VAPs provide an easy way for attorneys to have a big impact through pro bono service. The CT Judicial Branch has designed the VAPs to be as volunteer-friendly as possible. The time commitment can be as little as two hours; attorneys choose two-hour blocks of time that are convenient for them well in advance. Attorneys volunteer on Microsoft Teams from their home or office without having to travel. After a VAP event, the volunteer service is complete with no ongoing legal representation required. If a participant needs further assistance after a VAP meeting, the Judicial Branch staff at the Court Service Center or Law Library can provide additional information and resources. By volunteering for just two hours without having to leave their home or office, attorneys can help a CT resident know what to expect once they step into a courtroom or determine a next step in their path forward.

Right now, the VAPs need additional volunteers. There is a risk that some VAP events will need to be canceled or members of the public seeking help will be turned away. If you are looking for a way to use your legal skills to make a meaningful difference, consider volunteering. Volunteers must be attorneys with experience in one or more of the VAP legal areas covered. This opportunity is especially well suited to retired, semi-retired, and newer attorneys including those recently admitted to the bar; all attorneys are welcome to volunteer. Professional liability insurance is provided for volunteers in the Small Claims VAP; volunteers in the other VAPs are required to have their own liability insurance. ■

*To learn more about the CT Judicial Branch's VAPs, visit: jud.ct.gov/volunteer_atty_prgm.htm. If you are an attorney interested in volunteering, for the family law VAP, contact **Nicole Collins** at Nicole.Collins@jud.ct.gov; for the contract collections, foreclosure, and small claims VAPs, contact **Rose Ann Rush** at RoseAnn.Rush@jud.ct.gov.*

## NOTES

[1] The Small Claims VAP is co-sponsored by the CT Judicial Branch and the CT Bar Association.


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- Chief Justice Raheem L. Mullins, Connecticut Supreme Court
- Justice William H. Bright, Jr., Connecticut Supreme Court and Chair of the CT Access to Justice Commission

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# Answer the Call: Volunteer with Connecticut Probate Courts

By EVAN C. BRUNETTI

Are you looking for a rewarding opportunity to serve justice, the public, and the most vulnerable in our society using your lawyering skills? The Connecticut Probate Court system and the people it protects need your services. In addition to meeting your professional responsibilities under Rule 6.1, you will gain critical legal experience and priceless personal gratification. And under Practice Book section 2-27A, you may also be eligible for continuing legal education credits.

The 54 Probate Court Districts and six Regional Children's Probate Courts handle a wide range of matters affecting the elderly, children, adults with intellectual or developmental disability, persons with psychiatric or cognitive disabilities, and individuals suffering from substance use disorder, in addition to the court's traditional role of overseeing decedent estates and trusts.

Matters that come before the courts are often difficult and lifechanging. Many individuals require a great deal of assistance and there are several ways attorneys can volunteer their time to assist those with the greatest need within our system.

Probate petitions are often from members of the community who are concerned with the well-being of an individual and seek to place the individual under an Involuntary Conservatorship or a Guardianship for an Adult with Intellectual Disability. These individuals may be suffering from illness or cognitive impairment due to age or other circumstances. They are unable to care for themselves, and/or unable to manage their financial affairs, sometimes in total, in others with limited abilities. And sometimes these respondents are not incapable and need and deserve a strong advocate to protect their rights to independence.

One opportunity for attorneys to serve is as an attorney for respondents, ensuring that this individual's voice is heard and they have an advocate during judicial proceedings. Moreover, in these matters, these advocates ensure constitutional rights of parties are protected.

Another pro bono opportunity is serving as a conservator, a fiduciary appointed to manage the personal and/or financial affairs of the individual. Similarly, attorneys may volunteer to serve as a guardian for adults with intellectual disability who need a guardian but are without family or able friends to step up. Unfortunately, not all individuals with conservatorship or guardianship matters have the financial means or loved ones to help support and advocate for them. In these cases, third-party conservators and guardians are critical to protecting their constitutional rights and ensuring their needs are met.

Matters involving children are among the most sensitive and challenging matters in the Probate Courts. These matters may include removing or terminating parental rights or may involve property rights of minors. For these matters, attorneys may volunteer their time, whether as a court appointed guardian ad litem or as a court-appointed attorney for the minor, depending on the case.

The Probate Courts are not just courts addressing decedent estates and trust matters. They address the constitutional rights at the heart of justice and we need your services to ensure these protections.

For more information about opportunities, please contact your local Probate Court or visit: https://www.ctprobate.gov. ■

***Evan C. Brunetti*** *is the Deputy Director of External Affairs at the Office of the Probate Court Administrator and has served in the Connecticut Probate Courts for 19 years.*

Image credit: Phimwilai | AdobeStock

# "I Reject Your Reality and Substitute It With My Own": Alternate Facts, Competing Realities, and Societal Polarization

By JUSTICE RICHARD A. ROBINSON (RET.)

I am not a sociologist, an anthropologist, or any kind of "ologist," but something feels different about the times we are living in. People seem more tense and less civil, more willing to assert their own positions and less willing to tolerate views with which they disagree. Polarization in America is no longer simply a clash of opinions; it is a clash of realities, curated, customized, and fiercely defended… or attacked. In that environment, the phrase "I reject your reality and substitute my own" feels less like a line from the 1970s *Doctor Who* television series or the 1984 fantasy film *The Dungeonmaster*, and more like a national condition. Adam Savage later renewed the phrase for a broader popular audience when he adopted it on *MythBusters*, giving an old science-fiction and fantasy line new life as a shorthand for choosing one's own version of reality. The saying may be playful in science fiction and fantasy, but in civic life it is destructive and frightening.

That condition did not appear overnight. The polarization of our society did not begin with social media, but social media accelerated it. By the 1960s and 1970s, long-existing coalitions were already strained and fracturing. Partisan media in the 1980s and 1990s taught audiences to choose between competing versions of public life. The internet then made it possible to build echo chambers around us to protect our beliefs. Echo chambers do not create confirmation bias, but they do feed it. Confirmation bias is already part of how we tend to process information: we are more likely to seek out, trust, remember, and emphasize evidence that supports what we already believe, while discounting evidence that challenges us. Echo chambers make that tendency easier to indulge and harder to notice. They surround us with agreement, reduce our contact with contradictions, and make a familiar version of reality feel not merely comfortable, but obvious.

That environment helped prepare the ground for what came next. In 2017, the phrase "alternate facts" entered the national lexicon. It offered a way to defend what could not otherwise be defended and to assert what should not seriously be asserted. It became a cultural marker, signaling that facts themselves could be treated as optional or interchangeable.

One place where these competing realities are especially visible is the debate over diversity, equity, and inclusion. That controversy sits at the intersection of history, identity, law, institutional responsibility, and personal perception. I use the full phrase deliberately because "diversity, equity, and inclusion" names a set of values the concept was meant to address broader participation, fairer opportunity, and institutional belonging. The acronym "DEI," however, is not always received as a neutral abbreviation for those words. In current debate, it has become a shorthand with meanings of its own, often detached from the purposes the full phrase describes and, in some circles, vilified as something more threatening than the words themselves suggest. That distinction matters. The phrase and the acronym are related, but they are not necessarily interchangeable. The gap between them shows how competing realities take shape: the same concept can be understood in one conversation as an aspiration toward fairness and belonging, and in another as a threat to merit, autonomy, or institutional neutrality.

That gap matters because the DEI controversy is not simply a policy dispute. It is a test of whether people can reason from a shared factual record when the facts implicate how they understand fairness, opportunity, and belonging.

DEI has become one of the most visible battlegrounds for that struggle over facts. These are not merely competing opinions about policy; they are competing starting points about history, opportunity, fairness, and institutional responsibility. In one account, DEI is a commitment to fairness and a recognition that the past shaped the present and, if left unaddressed, will shape the future. In another, it is political overreach, an unfair preference system, and a threat to an existing meritocracy.

That is why the conflict should not be treated as a collision of equally valid realities. The concept of diversity, equity, and inclusion emerged in response to

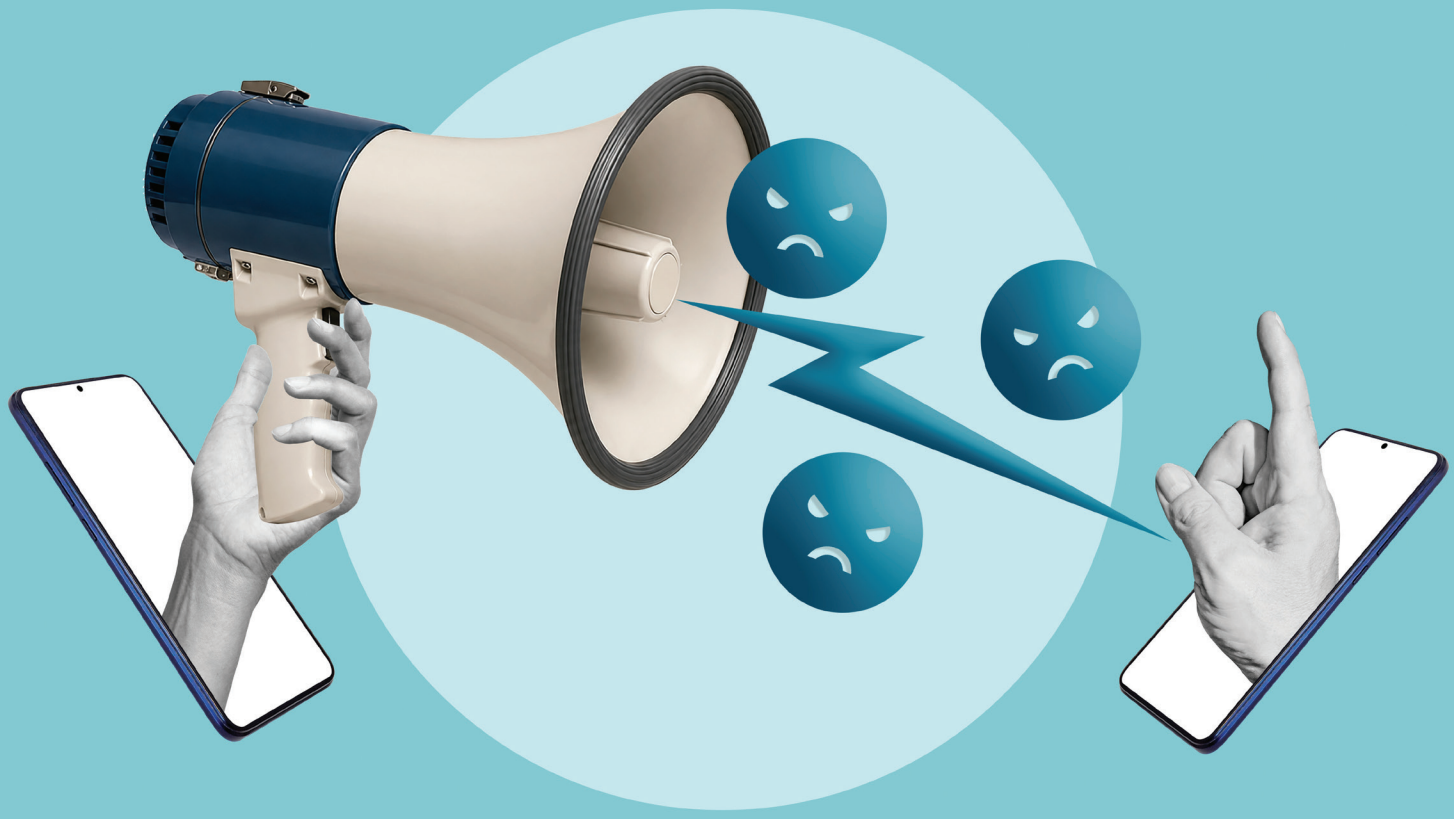


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documented patterns of discrimination, bias, and unequal opportunity. Yet people can interpret the same information in fundamentally different ways, elevating evidence that supports preexisting views and dismissing evidence that does not. As a result, disagreements that begin over policy often devolve into disputes over the underlying facts themselves.

The result has been a backlash against DEI, fueled less by evidence than by narrative. Narratives, once fused with identity, become resistant to correction. "Alternate facts" about DEI, what the acronym is taken to mean, what it does, and whom it serves, can circulate faster than any realistic effort to correct them.

That distortion has consequences far beyond the policy debate itself. Misinformation about identity, religion, and belonging creates confusion and fear. It also makes genuine dialogue harder because people are no longer merely debating policy choices; they are defending different accounts of who belongs, who is threatened, and what counts as truth.

For lawyers, these competing realities are not abstract cultural problems; they go to the core of what we do. We advise clients, select juries, negotiate conflicts, interpret evidence, assess credibility, and help institutions make decisions in rooms where people may not even agree on the baseline facts. Those disagreements shape how clients understand risk, how witnesses tell their stories, how jurors receive evidence, and how decision-makers evaluate fairness. A lawyer who assumes that everyone is reasoning from the same factual foundation may miss the central problem entirely. Increasingly, part of the lawyer's task is to identify the reality from which each participant is reasoning, separate assertion from proof, and bring the conversation back to evidence, process, and law.

Seen that way, shared facts, shared norms, shared trust, and shared realities are not background conditions for legal work; they are the materials from which legal work is built. When those materials fracture, the lawyer's role becomes harder and more important: not to eliminate disagreement, but to discipline it through evidence, fair process, and rules that participants can recognize as legitimate.

That is why the legal profession is uniquely positioned, and uniquely burdened, in this era. We are trained to interpret evidence, mediate conflict, and uphold the rule of law. But the challenges of our time require an additional discipline: the ability to navigate dueling accounts of reality without surrendering the profession's commitment to facts.

Responding to that challenge requires more than arguing from the facts as we understand them. It requires us to test assumptions, identify the premises beneath a dispute, and help clients and institutions distinguish disagreement over values from disagreement over reality itself.

The temptation to substitute our own facts and our own reality is understandable. It offers certainty and emotional safety. But the legal profession cannot function properly without shared commitments to evidence, process, and the idea that truth is discoverable and justice is possible. ■

***Justice Richard A. Robinson**, retired Chief Justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court, has over two decades of judicial experience, including appointments to the Appellate and Supreme Courts, and is currently a partner at Day Pitney LLP.*

# Connections Don't Happen by Accident

By SARA K. BONAIUTO



*Sara K. Bonaiuto is Chair of the Connecticut Bar Association Young Lawyers Section for the 2026–2027 bar year. She is an associate at Shipman & Goodwin LLP, where she practices in the area of commercial finance. She graduated from the University of Connecticut School of Law in 2018.*

As I begin my year as chair of the Young Lawyers Section (YLS), I have spent a lot of time thinking about what I want this year to be about. I kept coming back to one thing: **connection.**

I have been involved with the YLS Executive Committee for seven years. During that time, I have had the opportunity to serve in a number of different roles, work alongside attorneys from across the state and become increasingly involved in the Connecticut Bar Association. Those experiences have certainly helped me grow as a lawyer and as a leader, but when I think about what has been most valuable about my involvement, it is not a particular position I have held or program I have attended. It is the people I have met along the way.

The relationships I have developed through the bar have had a very real impact on my career. They have led to job opportunities and referrals. They have given me people I can call when I have a career question, need another perspective, or simply want to bounce an idea off someone who understands the profession. And many of those professional relationships have developed into genuine friendships.

Looking back, what strikes me most is that I could never have predicted which relationships would become important when they began.

I did not walk into a YLS event knowing that someone I met there might eventually refer me work. I did not sit down at an Executive Committee meeting knowing which person in the room might become a close colleague or friend. I certainly did not attend my first CBA event with a carefully constructed plan for how each conversation would advance my career.

I just kept showing up. And, over time, those connections added up.

That experience is the foundation for my focus as YLS chair this year: creating opportunities for meaningful connection, with a particular emphasis on bringing people together in person.

There is no question that the way we practice law has changed. Technology has made our profession more efficient and more flexible. We can attend meetings from our offices or homes, participate in programs without traveling across the state, and communicate with colleagues almost instantaneously. Those changes have provided tremendous benefits. But convenience and connection are not always the same thing.

Some of the most valuable conversations I have had through the CBA did not happen during the formal portion of a meeting or program. They happened before the meeting started, over dinner after an event, or because someone introduced me to the person standing next to them. Those moments are difficult to schedule, and they are almost impossible to replicate virtually. They also matter.

The legal profession has always been built on relationships. We rely on one another for referrals, advice, mentorship, professional opportunities, and sometimes simply reassurance that someone else has encountered the same challenge we are facing. For young lawyers who are still developing their professional circles, opportunities to form those relationships can be especially important.

That is why I want YLS to be intentional about creating them this year.

## More Than "Networking"

When we talk about professional connection, particularly with young lawyers, we often call it "networking," but that word sometimes makes the concept more complicated than it needs to be.

Networking can sound transactional: walk into a room, exchange business cards, make contacts and hope that someday one of those contacts turns into business. The relationships that have mattered most in my career did not develop that way. They developed because I got to know people.

Someone became the person I could call with a question. Someone else thought of me when an opportunity arose. I learned what other attorneys practiced and began thinking of them when matters came across my desk that were outside my practice area. We worked together on CBA initiatives, learned from one another, and became invested in each other's success.

Business development can certainly be one result of those relationships. I have personally received referrals and work through connections I made through the bar, but the value is much broader than that.

A strong professional network is also a group of people who answer the phone. That is something I hope every young lawyer in Connecticut has the opportunity to build.

## Creating Opportunities for Connection

Although connection will be a focus of YLS this year, creating a connected legal community extends beyond any one section of the CBA. The relationships that make our profession stronger cross practice areas, firms, generations, and geography.

One of my goals this year is to create more opportunities for those relationships to develop naturally for the members of the YLS. That means continuing to provide substantive programming while also recognizing the value of what happens around that programming, the conversations before an event begins, the introductions made afterward, and the relationships that develop when people continue to show up.

It also means being thoughtful about what we want members to gain from their involvement. Attendance numbers and successful programs matter, but they do not tell the whole story. Some of the most meaningful results of bar involvement are difficult to measure. They may not become apparent until months or even years later, when someone makes a referral, offers an opportunity, answers a phone call or becomes a trusted friend.

Those are the outcomes I want us to keep in mind this year.

My goal is not simply to increase attendance at YLS events or add names to a membership list. I want our members to leave having actually connected with someone. If every person who attends a CBA or YLS event leaves having had one meaningful conversation with someone they did not know before, that is a success. Because we rarely know where one conversation will lead.

## One Connection at a Time

Seven years into my own involvement with YLS, I can now see opportunities, referrals, professional relationships, and friendships that trace back to conversations that seemed entirely ordinary when they happened. At the time, they were just conversations. It is only in hindsight that I can see how much some of them mattered.

That is the kind of community I hope we continue building, not only within YLS, but throughout the Connecticut Bar Association. A community where young lawyers know one another. Where newer and more experienced attorneys interact regularly. Where we refer work to one another, learn from one another, advocate for one another and develop relationships that make us better lawyers and make the practice of law a little more connected.

There is no formula for knowing which introduction, event, or conversation will ultimately matter. The important thing is creating enough opportunities for those moments to happen. And then continuing to show up.

Connections do not happen by accident. This year, I hope we can be a little more intentional about creating them. ■



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