

Pro Bono Week (or Why You Should Get Involved in Pro Bono)

By [Jessica Nault Neau](#)

"With great power comes great responsibility."¹

I have always been a fan of superheroes. I remember coming home from school when I was younger and watching reruns of the old cartoons. As much as I loved Batman and the protégés of Professor X, I can honestly say I was never a huge fan of Spider-man. He wasn't as mysterious as Batman and he didn't have superpowers like the X-Men. Sticking to walls never seemed that impressive to me. But, the quote from Spiderman's Uncle Ben always stuck with me: "With great power comes great responsibility".²

So why do I bring up superheroes? Because you can be a superhero when you do pro bono work. Interestingly enough, Eric Holder essentially repeated Uncle Ben's idea in an address to the National Pro Bono Summit in 2011. He said that attorneys "are bound by a responsibility to use our unique skills and training - not just to advance cases, but to serve a cause; and to help our nation fulfill its founding promise of equal justice under law."³

¹ Wikipedia, *Uncle Ben*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Ben#.22With_great_power_comes_great_responsibility.22 (last visited Sept. 16, 2014).

² It is hard to pin down exactly where this quote comes from. Where I first heard it and learned it was in the Spiderman cartoon, said by Peter Parker's Uncle Ben. In the Spiderman universe, it seems to be most commonly attributed to him. *Id.*

³ Eric Holder, *Att'y Gen., Dep't of Justice, Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the American Bar Association's National Pro Bono Summit* (Oct. 25, 2011).

I chose a career in public interest for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons is that I feel being a lawyer means I have a unique set of knowledge and skills that give me an advantage. Working at a non-profit is my way of responsibly using the power that comes from my legal knowledge. I give back to the community so that others can pull themselves out of poverty, escape an abusive relationship, become a US citizen, get a landlord to fix an apartment or house, or get public benefits for their disabled child. I know that not everyone can work for a non-profit. But in this age of technology, doing pro bono has never been easier. We'll get to that later though.

If that argument isn't enough to make you want to run out and find the nearest pro bono opportunity, maybe data can convince you. In Minnesota, there is one private attorney for every 365 potential paying clients, compared to one legal aid attorney for every 4,022 potential low-income clients.⁴ Just to get a visual of those numbers:

1 : 365

Private attorneys to
potential clients in Minnesota

1 : 4,022

Legal aid attorneys to potential low-income
clients in Minnesota

⁴ American Bar Association, *Promoting Pro Bono from the Bench in Minnesota*, http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/probono_public_service/ls_pb_judicial_mn_bar_powerpoint_2014.authcheckdam.pdf (last visited Sept. 17, 2014).

With limited funding and staff, legal aid offices are not able to take every case that comes in the door. With pro bono assistance, the number and type of cases they can take and the number of people they can help grows tremendously. And as a new lawyer you are probably looking for a way to develop your skills. Through pro bono you can learn about a different area of law, increase your client interaction skills, or get inside a courtroom, to name just a few benefits. Just google “why pro bono” and you’ll find numerous blog posts (like [this one](#) and [this one](#)) and articles (including one talking about [how Justice Brandeis did pro bono and why you should too](#) and one in the MSBA’s own [Bench & Bar](#)). While the economy has been improving in the years since the Great Recession, the need for legal services is still there for many Minnesotans.

If that hasn’t convinced you to do pro bono, I’ll add one more incentive: you can get CLE credit by doing pro bono work! The Minnesota Board of Continuing Legal Education allows attorneys to get 1 hour of standard CLE credit for every 6 hours of pro bono work. An attorney can get up to 6 hours of CLE credit per reporting period through pro bono.⁵ While new attorneys are trying to learn everything they can about the practice of law and their substantive areas, being able to get a few CLE credits by doing pro bono helps directly expand your practice and increase your skills.

Where can I go to do pro bono?

⁵ See <http://www.mbcle.state.mn.us/MBCLE/pages/probono.asp> for more information about pro bono opportunities.

You are excited to start pro bono work, but where to begin? The first stop should be ProJusticeMN.org’s [Pro Bono Week](#) page. Since 2009, the American Bar Association has had National Pro Bono Celebrations. This year Pro Bono Week is October 19 -25, 2014. The celebration is a “tool for enhancing and expanding local efforts to increase access to justice for all.”⁶ There are a number of events happening in Minnesota in honor of pro bono week. Legal aid organizations, the MSBA, and State Support will have CLEs and events to celebrate pro bono week and get people involved. Go to [ProJusticeMN.org](#) to see all the opportunities available in October.

There are so many organizations where you can do pro bono work. To start, the Minnesota Board of Continuing Legal Education requires that any pro bono work done for CLE credit is through an approved legal services provider. This includes organizations that have funding through the [Legal Services Corporation](#) or [Minnesota Legal Services Advisory Commission](#), and those that have [applied for designation](#) as an approved legal services provider. This represents 40 different organizations or opportunities where you can do pro bono for CLE credit.

Do you work at a large firm? Talk to your pro bono coordinator. Don’t have a pro bono coordinator? Start with one of the organizations above. Or look up your favorite organization and see if they need help at a clinic or taking on full representation cases.

⁶ Probono.net, *Why Celebrate Pro Bono*, <http://www.probono.net/celebrateprobono/> (last visited Sept.16, 2014).

Many organizations provide the opportunity to take on a full case which can give you great experience working with clients and being in a courtroom. But there are plenty of others that do not have the same long-term commitments, such as legal advice clinics or Minnesota Legal Advice Online. Remember that while pro bono can mean a full representation case, there are also other ways to get involved.

I don't have time to go to a clinic or do a full representation case, is there anything else I can do?

I'm so glad you asked. In May of this year, [Legal Services State Support](#), a project of the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, launched its newest website⁷, [Minnesota Legal Advice Online](#) (MLAO).

MLAO allows you to do pro bono work from your desk. Users pick their substantive area, tell you what county they live in, and post questions to the website. Once the question is up, volunteer attorneys can sign in, look at the questions, and choose which ones they want to answer. You can also sign up to get a notification when a question gets posted in your preferred area of law (family or housing, for example).

Once you take a question out of the queue, we ask that you answer the question within three days. This gives you time to do some research if you aren't entirely sure of the answer, or just want to double-check that your instincts are right. As a new attorney it can be daunting to answer client questions without any backup. MLAO helps you gain

confidence in answering questions and interacting with clients.

Many of the MLAO users have similar legal issues. Getting a security deposit back from a landlord, starting a divorce in Minnesota, and communicating with a debt collector are all fairly common questions. Several of our volunteers are able to answer three or more questions in one brief sitting.

Just some of the benefits of using MLAO:

- You can answer questions anywhere you have an internet connection;
- You get to choose how much time you put into pro bono;
- You can get experience answering brief legal questions and communicating with clients in writing;
- The website helps you track how many hours you've done for CLE reporting; and
- You get to help people in Minnesota who might not otherwise get help!

You can go [here](#) to learn more, [watch tutorials](#), and you can go to www.mnlegaladvice.org to sign up.

⁷ Newest must mean there are others, right? Check out [LawHelpMN](#) for resources for clients, and [ProjusticeMN](#) for advocates.



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