

Do You Think Volunteering for Legal Services or Doing Pro Bono Work Can Help You Grow Your Practice?

A September 2010 discussion on SoloSez, the email listserv for general practice, solo and small firm lawyers

Hey, I am curious to know what everyone's experiences have been doing pro bono work or volunteering for legal services and how that helped grow your practice.

When I worked at my previous firm, I did pro bono and low bono work for immigrant victims of domestic violence and crime victims. Once I started my own practice, I was pretty connected in the domestic violence community to get some clients through those referral sources, albeit mostly income clients. One of my bigger clients is the sister-in-law of one of my pro bono clients from my last firm.

I think the key is to be very narrow in the parameters of your pro bono service if you take cases, otherwise everything might be pro bono.

Emily Haverkamp, Kansas

Absolutely. I have gained a ton of experience and referrals/contacts through pro bono/volunteer work. Not to mention that fuzzy feeling you get from helping people and using your skill set for the forces of good. I like that.

Jake Eisenstein, Colorado

I've been working part time/pro bono on foreclosure defense since March. Indeed, it was the first practice experience I got post-grad/barring. I haven't had a pile of referrals from it per se. But that said, I have gained quite a lot of real experience on tough stuff. No fetching coffee. Honest-to-Pete client management, negotiation, case intake/eval, etc. Have had tough situations where I had to fire the client. The experience has given me more confidence--I do not think I would have had the nerve to try to solo w/o it. It has also made me very aware of client/case warning signs so I can avoid trouble before getting into it in my own practice. This already saved me from what could have been a really bad client for my practice. I decided to not accept the case, and I found out some info that proved I'd had the spot-on instinct. I have one case that appears destined for filing shortly--fairly complex predatory lending/foreclosure rescue scam. Put on a CPA claim and I can get atty's fees for

it, which would be icing on the cake.

And! Sometimes you get FREE and VALUABLE training. I just returned from an all day session on foreclosure matters, put on by NCLC folks. FREE. And tomorrow I will be in FDCPA training all day, also from NCLC folks. Really, really good stuff!!!!

And, yes, there is that warm fuzzy feeling when you help someone, esp someone who would not have had access to legal assistance.

Lisa M. von Biela, Washington

Gee, and I thought this fuzzy feeling was just a consequence of middle age....

Richard J. Rutledge, North Carolina

Yes. It does make a difference and it feels good to help people, non-profits, etc... who genuinely need your help. As lawyers we have a great opportunity to make a difference for the betterment of our local community, our state, our profession and more.

I respectfully also believe that earning a good reputation will help your law practice regardless of practice area.

Just my thoughts.

Alex Russell, New Mexico

Absolutely!

I practice family law exclusively. Almost all of my potential clients need a financial break somehow, but I am not in a position to handle individual cases on a pro-bono basis. However, what I do is give workshops every other month at the local Women's Center and I do a monthly legal clinic at the local Hispanic community agency. Some of those people I see end up calling me later and hiring me. Some give my card to friends. But, most importantly, the community organization knows who I am and I get a lot of referrals that way. In fact, I would say that over 50% of my clients come somehow from the work I do in these organizations.

The other benefit is that I am sometimes able to give these potential clients a heads up as to how much a consult would cost, how much it might cost to get started, why we charge what we do, etc. That way, by the time they actually call my office to set up an appointment, they already know that it's going to cost. But, often because they understand the process better because of the workshop or clinic, the consult is shorter and many come in with a mindset of hiring me. I do work with many of my clients on payment plans or I require a lower amount up front, but almost every single one of my clients pays me something, sometimes.

Also, these organizations often contact me if they have a person who needs a different type of attorney (not family law.) Because they trust and know me, I guess they trust that I will refer them to someone I trust as well.

The amount of pro-bono work you do isn't as important, IMO, as the impact the pro-bono work has on you professionally. You have to enjoy what you're doing and it's OK to do it, in part, to grow your practice. Think about how you'll get your name out to those who will send you referrals. I like the impact of workshops or legal clinics better than doing a case on a pro-bono basis, but that's primarily impacted by my practice area.

Good luck!

Sarah Carr, North Carolina

I did some volunteer work for Legal Services and while it has never resulted in a paying client, it did result in a temporary job and great contacts. When one of the attorneys went on a maternity leave, I was asked to fill in for her.

Overall my experience has been great, and it taught me patience and humility. You learn to be more appreciative too. Not to mention great training, and being able to help those truly in need.

By the way, the Legal Services in New Jersey is facing cut backs and layoffs (especially South Jersey Legal Services) and less representation means more pro se litigants.

Natalia Teperm, New Jersey