



Feature

## Pro Bono Paralegals: Heroes in the Shadows

By Andrew Tan

**Whenever people think of legal aid in public interest organizations, they think of the lawyer who has his or her heart in social justice. However, the attorney sidekicks known as paralegals can be just as important in assisting public interest causes.**



Pro Bono Publico is a term used to describe anything done for the public good but, only recently has it also been used to describe any work that is done without compensation. This word is often associated with the legal profession in relation to attorneys who assist public interest groups, such as Legal Aid, for free. Public

interest groups are founded as people discover unmet needs in their communities. The legal work done for these groups is necessary because the members represented cannot afford going through normal channels for legal assistance. However, pro bono work is not just limited to attorneys. In fact, legal assistants, or paralegals, have also assisted public interest causes; they are very rarely recognized.

The type of work that legal assistants do for public interest groups varies from group to group. This ranges from assisting pro bono attorneys with their cases to direct client advocacy. In the latter case specialized training is usually required. Regardless of the public interest group, every group will generally have some type of training in order to acquaint the volunteers with the group's mission and the type of work that will be expected. Examples of public interest groups that utilize legal assistants include the Paralegal Advocacy Volunteers for the Elderly (PAVE) and the Homeless Advocacy Project.

In general, unless one is a member of a paralegal association that requires that a certain number of hours be dedicated to pro bono work, there are few incentives for paralegals or legal assistants to involve themselves in pro bono work. So why bother at all? If one is a philanthropist, pro bono work

is enjoyable and rewarding. However, many people who are not philanthropists believe that pro bono work is very time consuming and can lead to frustration and exhaustion. Yet, even for the self-interested person, there is always something to gain from doing pro bono work.

Because pro bono work in the legal field is directed at the low-income segment of the population, the types of cases one gets are extremely varied—a great way to avoid boredom. Therefore, the type of professional experience obtained from pro bono work cannot be duplicated. This means that as a potential employee, you will be of great value to a wide range of employers. For legal assistants who are recent graduates, pro bono work can give them a foothold in the job market because potential employers will want some assurance that the person they are hiring is competent. Another potential benefit is that because one will be working in tandem with attorneys, there exists the possibility of word-of-mouth referrals. Finally, most people who enjoy doing pro bono work believe one of the greatest rewards is making a difference in another person's life.

Despite all of these benefits to volunteering time towards public interest groups, the question of time is still probably first on most people's minds. The majority of people who are willing to contribute time to pro bono work do have the concern that they may not have the time to contribute. However, unless one has decided to take on a major case for a public interest group, pro bono work is actually not very time consuming. According to Amy Greer in her article in the Allegheny County Lawyers Journal, "Top 10 Reasons Why I Still Do Pro Bono Work," "Most pro bono matters do not present complex legal or factual issues, requiring a minimal amount of actual...time." In sum, there is no downside to helping public interest groups, and legal assistants who do volunteer time



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are to be applauded because they show a great deal of effort and dedication to their work. This reinforces the purpose for the legal profession: to do justice.

Additional information on pro bono organizations for legal assistants can be found on the American Bar Association's website ([www.abanet.org](http://www.abanet.org)).

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