

# You Don't Need Family Law Experience to Volunteer at the Help Center

When I am out socializing with our members, a common question often arises: Can I volunteer at the Help Center if I don't have any experience in family law? Should I? Is the training enough to prepare me to volunteer? The answer is simple – yes, yes and yes. Here's why:

First, the work we're doing at the Help Center, while important and sometimes challenging, is not very legally in-depth. You may know that the basic premise of the Help Center is to work with pro se litigants to file petitions. But if you haven't been to Albany County Family Court,

you may not know that these petitions are actually plain-language forms that are meant to guide a pro se petitioner through the information necessary to make out a cause of action. As a lawyer, the forms will seem very self-explanatory because they explicitly ask for all the elements of a prima facie case. You're most useful as a volunteer not because of your knowledge of family law, but because of your ability to distill a client's story into its legally relevant elements.

Family court forms can be difficult for petitioners to understand and complete for many reasons—the main one being unfamiliarity with the legal system, but things like limited English proficiency, illiteracy, and high emotionality can all play a role. Unrepresented litigants are often desperate, upset, scared, or confused, but sometimes a fresh eye and a brief explanation can make all the difference. The challenge and reward of volunteering in the Help Center come from making a client feel that their concerns have been heard and addressed in their petition, and relieving their anxiety by helping them to be more prepared for their first court date.

Maybe most importantly, you're helping clients create a roadmap for the rest of their case. Issues you discuss in a petition can help remind litigants of the important facts to bring out in front of a judge. Judges also benefit greatly from a petition prepared by an attorney. A clear, relevant petition can save a lot of time in the courtroom, especially when clients can be easily drawn off topic due to the complicated nature of family court matters.

Before you volunteer, you'll attend an Albany County Bar Association training CLE that lasts about two hours and goes over the basics of family court petitions. While volunteering at the Help Center you will have all the materials from the training session available, as well as the



names and numbers of a few attorneys you can call if you need assistance. We'll even set up to shadow a more experienced Help Center volunteer before your first solo shift.

Your commitment to the Help Center is flexible and finite. Volunteers typically spend two to three hours a month in the Help Center, which is scheduled at your convenience during the Court's operating hours. Your clients sign a limited scope services agreement acknowledging that your representation does not extend beyond their time face-to-face with you in the Help Center. Your clients acknowledge that they will be proceeding pro se in their case, unless and until they qualify for a court-appointed attorney later in the proceedings. Your only job in the Help Center is to help petitioners clear that very first hurdle—getting a legally sufficient argument in front of a judge—and it ends when you leave the Help Center after your shift.

Give me a call to talk about how you can get involved, or plan to attend our next training CLE on June 20 from 9:30-11:30 am at Albany Law School and learn what we're all about. (518) 445-7691 x113 ●

We want to Hear from You!

What topics would you like to see discussed in the ACBA Newsletter?

*Your thoughts are important to us!*

Contact us at [acba@albanycountybar.com](mailto:acba@albanycountybar.com)

