

Celebrating the 'pro bono experience' in Indiana

During the American Bar Association's National Pro Bono Celebration held during the last week of October, Indiana's legal community joined other professionals across the county in recognizing those of its members who give of their time and talent in the service "of the common good."

On the occasion of the national event, President Barack Obama noted that "pro bono lawyers work tirelessly to break down barriers to opportunity and justice, volunteering countless hours to provide critical legal services to our most vulnerable citizens."

Indiana is the home to many of these "tireless" attorneys who devote themselves to the public good at their own personal expense. The national celebration gave the Indiana legal community – from the highest court in Indiana on down – the opportunity both to say "thank you" and to encourage more members of our profession to participate in what some call the "pro bono experience."

On the Friday before the national celebration officially began, the Indiana Supreme Court announced that it was transferring \$25,000 to the Indiana Bar Foundation's Loan Repayment Assistance Program, and that it would match any new money that the Foundation raised to support this program, up to \$175,000. The Loan Repayment Assistance Program "assists law school graduates employed at nonprofit organizations dedicated to serving the civil legal aid needs" of those who cannot afford an attorney.

During the week following the Supreme Court's announcement, many of the Indiana Pro Bono Commission's local districts also recognized those attorneys who contribute their services to the pro bono effort.

The Volunteer Lawyer Network (Pro Bono District 2), headquartered in South Bend, distributed mugs filled with coffee, tea and chocolate to all of its "superstar" attorneys who "go above and beyond to help the poor" in tough economic times, Timi Sloat, District 2 plan administrator, said. The Network hand-delivered these mugs to 30 attorneys throughout St. Joseph, Elkhart, Kosciusko and Marshall counties.

At its annual dinner, Pro Bono District 4, Lafayette and the surrounding area, recognized one attorney from each of the eight counties in its district who had made an outstanding contribution to pro bono. The district also recognized

Crawfordsville attorney Patricia McGaughey Sosbe as its volunteer attorney of the year.

"As an attorney in a small practice setting with an eye constantly on the bottom line, I used to wonder if I could afford to do pro bono work. Now I firmly believe that I cannot afford not to. Not only am I charged as an attorney with an obligation to do this work, my pro bono work satisfies that urge to 'do good in the world' that was part of my reason for entering this profession. If every attorney in this state would devote just a few hours each year to pro bono work, Indiana could be a place where 'equal justice for all' is the norm, not just a goal," Sosbe said.

Attorneys from the southeastern corner of the state were honored by a banquet at Belterra Casino & Resort, courtesy of the Legal Volunteers of Southeastern Indiana (District 12).

District 1, covering the northwestern corner of the state, thanked its pro bono attorneys at a Celebration Reception in the Lake County Courthouse. Lake Superior Court Chief Judge John Pera personally hosted the reception.

With help from a charitable contribution, the Volunteer Lawyer Program of Southwestern Indiana (District 13) was able to run an ad in the *Evansville Courier & Press*, recognizing 22 attorneys in the locale who had given at least 50 hours of their time in 2009.

"I'm hoping that people see the ad and realize all the good work that gets done," said Beverly Corn, District 13 Co-Plan Administrator. "I think the main reason for us to put the ad in the paper is to let attorneys know we are celebrating the efforts of the attorneys who volunteer."

Corn noted that one attorney honored had given 100 hours of time. In connection with the advertisement, Corn's office passed out stickers and other "goodies" to local attorneys who had been generous with their time.

Legal Aid, District 11, which provides services to Brown, Bartholomew, Decatur, Jackson and Jennings counties in south central Indiana, ran ads in several local papers, recognizing those attorneys who had contributed to the pro bono effort.

Some pro bono districts also took the national celebration as an opportunity to offer pro bono services to the public.

Pro Bono District 4 hosted a local "Talk to a Lawyer Today" event. Attorneys from throughout the area answered general legal questions for any member of the public who needed steering in the right direction

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FAIR COMMENT



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on an issue. District 2 also hosted a similar event in South Bend. District 3, located in Fort Wayne and representing northeast Indiana, with the assistance of the Allen County Bar Association, held its weekly legal phone hotline. Volunteer attorneys staff the hotline each week to answer general legal questions for the public.

Some districts used the national event as a chance to educate attorneys on pro bono and to recruit new attorneys for pro bono projects. Local bar associations and Indiana's law schools also encouraged both current and future attorneys to participate in pro bono.

District 4 held a conference for attorneys interested in volunteering their time to ensure that those guardians working with the Tippecanoe County Adult Guardianship Services Program met their legal obligations to the people who rely on them to handle their affairs and provide for their needs.

The Indianapolis Bar Association, in conjunction with the Heartland Pro Bono Council (Pro Bono district 8) and the Julian Center, hosted an immigration CLE at the offices of Barnes & Thornburg in Indianapolis. More than 50 attorneys attended and received free credit after agreeing to take on a pro bono case. Indianapolis attorney Shariq Siddiqui with the Julian Center, a not-for-profit organization that provides shelter to victims of domestic violence, organized the event. The immigration seminar was one of three free CLE seminars that the Julian Center offered.

The Indiana University School of Law-Indianapolis held its 7th Annual Pro Bono & Public Interest Week. Students had the opportunity to learn about how to get involved in pro bono activities

through both panel discussions and a pro bono fair involving local providers. Chief Justice of Indiana Randall T. Shepard shared opening remarks prior to a panel discussion on the pro bono experience.

Shawn Sullivan, president of the Evansville Bar Association, described in his local bar's October newsletter how he "had the pleasure" of representing an elderly woman as a pro bono attorney. She periodically sent him Christmas cards for years, and he had never had a "client who was more grateful and appreciative.

"My experience is consistent with every pro bono attorney with whom I have ever spoken," Sullivan wrote.

It is hoped that this year's celebration will inspire more attorneys to embrace the "pleasure" of pro bono services. According to Shawn, expect a great reward! ﷻ

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