Pro Bono Program

The Pro Bono Program is a formal volunteer program recognized by the American Bar Association. The program is characterized by a referral system, which is designed to match students with law-related pro bono opportunities in the community. Last year, students devoted more than 500 hours to pro bono work, putting class instruction to practical use by volunteering.

In order to help match students with pro bono opportunities in the community, the Legal Clinic added the position of Director of Pro Bono Programs & Clinic Administration. The director matches students with community programs, locates and publicizes pro bono opportunities, records student participation, processes and oversees Rule XV certification, and arranges malpractice insurance.

Pro Bono Goals

The Pro Bono Program works to instill in law students the value of pro bono contributions. Students cultivate relationships by volunteering with legal aid programs, attorneys, government agencies, and others. They also build relationships with student groups, professors, and school administrators, emphasizing the importance of pro bono work and the opportunities provided by the School of Law Pro Bono Program. The program aims to match students with projects commensurate with their interests and skills. An evaluation survey at the end of the year ensures program effectiveness and sustainability. Each year, the graduating student who devotes the most hours to pro bono work is awarded the Bobby Fussell Outstanding Pro Bono Service Award.

Pro Bono Opportunities

School of Law students volunteer in a variety of service activities for the community, both legal and non-legal. Students who volunteer with Legal Aid of Northwest Arkansas perform paralegal duties or work under supervision as Rule XV student attorneys. Other students volunteer at the public defender’s office, city prosecutor’s office, or with private attorneys and organizations.

Habitat for Humanity Wills Project – The Habitat for Humanity Wills Project is a non-credit, pro bono project housed in the Legal Clinic. Under the supervision of volunteer faculty, student attorneys provide basic estate-planning services for families that have been recipients of Washington County Habitat for Humanity homes. Students review the manner in which the client holds title to the home and other assets and they prepare simple wills, advance health care directives (living wills), powers of attorney, and other related documents. The project affords students the opportunity for pro bono service in a context that mirrors an estate-planning practice for clients of modest means.

To participate in the Wills Project, students must qualify for certification under Rule XV and must have the approval of the project’s faculty supervisor. The anticipated level of demand for wills services will determine the number of students who participate at any time.

Impact of Pro Bono Work

Every year in this country, four out of five low-income people in need of legal assistance are denied service. Many eligible clients do not receive help because of a language barrier, disability, or lack of literacy. Many others are turned away because of overwhelming case loads at legal services offices. In the United States, there is an average of one legal aid attorney for every 6,861 low-income people. With help from attorneys and student attorneys, we can help decrease this number.

Why Practice Pro Bono

Rule 6.1 of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct recognizes an attorney’s obligation to provide legal service to the community. Ideally, every attorney should perform a minimum of 50 pro bono publico hours annually. This service is not mandatory but is an aspiration. By giving back to the community in which they live and work, law students and lawyers contribute to the advancement of their community, give assistance to the poor, and develop true professionalism in the practice of law.