



## Dispelling the "Myths" of Pro Bono

### **Myth #1: I do not have time to do pro bono work.**

This is one of the most significant individual obstacles to performing pro bono work. Attorneys are busy, which is a good thing for both the attorney and his or her employer. However, pro bono work does not have to involve a huge time commitment. There are persons of limited means who only require a few hours of legal assistance. A substantial amount of pro bono work consists of small, discrete projects that involve less than ten hours of an attorney's time. For example, assisting an elderly person with a power of attorney or living will might involve three to five hours of your time, as does reviewing a lease or purchase contract for a person of limited means. There are numerous pro bono projects in need of only a few hours of an attorney's time, and the rewards of this work are great whether it involves five hours or hundreds of hours.

### **Myth #2: I do not have expertise in the area of law where pro bono work is available.**

A significant segment of pro bono legal service needs involves work that may be outside the expertise of attorneys at a corporation. For example, there is a great need for assistance in family law and immigration cases, both practices that do not have a presence in most corporate legal departments. Attorneys should not be discouraged, however, from branching into areas of the law where they may have an interest but not the experience. There are dozens of public interest agencies in Chicago who not only screen pro bono cases, but also provide support to their volunteer attorneys. In addition, many agencies provide substantive legal training programs for interested attorneys, sometimes in the attorney's own office. Finally, attorneys who practice in a particular area are usually receptive to questions from other volunteer attorneys and can be very helpful.

### **Myth #3: Our malpractice insurance policy does not cover pro bono work.**

Even if your corporation does not carry malpractice insurance or the policy does not cover pro bono work, many pro bono and legal aid agencies in Chicago have policies that cover their volunteer attorneys. If you do not have insurance coverage, you should inquire with a particular agency as to its coverage. A corporation may also purchase malpractice insurance to cover its pro bono program. In addition, it is important that the same preliminary steps taken when you represent a corporate client are taken when you represent a pro bono client. Pro bono clients should be treated the same as a corporate client when initiating the representation, including conflicts checks, and more importantly, treating the pro bono client as any other client during the representation.

### **Myth #4: My clients do not care about pro bono work.**

Clients cannot care about your pro bono work if they do not know about it. Even in a corporate legal department, client relationships are an important part of your practice. Clients like to know that their attorneys are well-rounded individuals. Further, your clients are also employees of the corporation, and they are likely to appreciate that their attorneys are "doing good" in the community.

### **Myth #5: Pro bono work will displace "real" client work.**

The "work displacement" concern is likely to be raised as a deterrent to pro bono work. Studies on this issue, however, have concluded that not only does pro bono work not displace "real" client work, but in fact the busiest and most efficient attorneys in an office are the attorneys performing the most pro bono work! These studies confirm that successful attorneys who do pro bono work are not turning down regular client work; they are simply integrating pro bono work into their practice.