

# Virginia Law Foundation Provides Critical Support to Virginia Bar Members Wishing to Engage in Pro Bono Representation

by Ray White

As the philanthropic arm of Virginia's practicing bar since 1974, the Virginia Law Foundation is an independent, 501(c)(3) organization that has provided more than \$25 million in grants to support law-related projects throughout Virginia that facilitate access to justice, cultivate an appreciation and understanding of the rule of law, and provide education in support of these ideals. The foundation also encourages civil engagement and recognizes excellence in the practice of law through its fellows program, and offers not-for-profit continuing legal education through Virginia CLE®.

Recently, in furtherance of this mission, the foundation has joined with the Virginia Access to Justice Commission to provide critical support to Virginia bar members wishing to engage in pro bono representation. Virginia attorneys volunteer countless hours of free counsel to help fill unmet legal needs in their communities. However, even with all these donated hours, the justice gap remains formidable in Virginia, as it does in all states. Specifically, it is estimated that only 20 percent of the civil legal needs of low-income citizens are being met.

One of the reasons why attorneys might be reticent to provide pro bono services is that while they may be experts in their own fields, they may not feel comfortable taking on cases in different practice areas. Thus, even an attorney who practices antitrust law at a "Best Lawyers in America" level may still not feel confident taking on a pro

bono matter involving divorce, landlord-tenant, or consumer issues. On the one hand, it is understandable that many Virginia attorneys do not want to provide anything short of top quality representation. Nonetheless, when this intersects with the frustrating reality that so many of us want to provide pro bono services but don't feel prepared enough to do so, the end result is that just as many low-income Virginians are still not having their legal needs met.

**To help with this conundrum, the Virginia Law Foundation has launched a new *Pro Bono Educational Portal* where attorneys providing pro bono representation to their fellow Virginians have access to Virginia CLE®'s entire library of on-demand, subject-specific training to aid in that pro bono work — for free.** More than 350 online seminars and accompanying written materials are available at no charge to assist in specific pro bono cases. Topics include family and domestic relations issues, bankruptcy, elder law, and many more relevant practice areas presented by Virginia lawyers recognized as leaders in their fields.

This initiative has been met with overwhelming praise from many corners of the profession. The recognition is best summed up by John Whitfield, co-chair of the Virginia Access to Justice Commission and executive director of Blue Ridge Legal Services, who noted, "This generous offering is a huge step forward in our efforts to promote pro bono work and narrow the justice gap. In one fell swoop, the Virginia Law

Foundation, through Virginia CLE®, is providing the training resources needed to mobilize pro bono attorneys throughout the commonwealth who have wanted to help, but felt like they lacked the subject matter experience."

Customers write to me regularly, echoing John's support and thanking the Virginia Law Foundation and the Access to Justice Commission for making this possible — with each one indicating what a great comfort it is to know that this sort of professional support is available.

At the time of this writing, barely two months since launching this project, well over 100 attorneys have created an account in the educational portal. The most popular subject areas accessed thus far have been family law, consumer law, housing, and Social Security, though there has also been considerable interest in areas beyond these topics. It is heartening to know, too, that over 50 percent of those using the portal have indicated that they intend to provide more than 40 hours of pro bono service this year.

The Virginia Law Foundation and its educational division, Virginia CLE®, along with the Virginia Access to Justice Commission, have many accomplishments, but I must say, nothing we have done during my time of service makes me prouder than the work we have done in providing this educational portal.

Full details of the program can be found at [www.vacle.org/probono](http://www.vacle.org/probono).