

Young Lawyers Conference Pro Bono Programs

by Maya M. Eckstein, 2006–2007 Young Lawyers Conference President



We have built a legal framework to protect the poor, and it's a structure we can be proud of. But it has a gate in the front, and lawyers hold the keys. Unless we're willing to unlock the gate for those who can't afford a key of their own, and let them into a shelter we've built for their protection, we might as well not have built it at all.

—Former United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

Attorneys are privileged members of society. Well-educated and articulate, attorneys have a monopoly to represent clients and practice law. Therefore, attorneys have a professional obligation to perform pro bono work on behalf of those who do not have access to the courts or other legal services.

Rule 6.1 of the Virginia Rules of Professional Conduct states that “[a] lawyer should render at least two percent per year of the lawyer’s professional time to pro bono *publico* legal services.” These activities include “poverty law, civil rights law, public interest law, and volunteer activities designed to increase the availability of pro bono legal services.”¹ Rule 6.1 also states that “[e]very lawyer, regardless of professional prominence or professional work load, has a personal responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay, and personal involvement in the problems of the disadvantaged can be one of the most rewarding experiences in the life of a lawyer.”

The Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference offers ways for lawyers to fulfill their pro bono obligations.

- In the **Wills for Heroes** program, lawyers provide simple wills, powers of attorney and advanced medical directives on a pro bono basis to Virginia’s firefighters, police officers and other first responders. The program includes free continuing legal education training. Wills for Heroes has been offered in several areas of the state. The YLC soon will host a conference call on how to set up the program in other jurisdictions. For information, contact Erin S. Whaley at Erin.Whaley@troutmansanders.com.
- In the **Domestic Violence Safety Program**, lawyers represent domestic-violence victims pro bono in protective-order, custody and support cases. The programs offer free continuing legal education training to attorneys in exchange for their commitment to handle cases. As part of the program, attorneys also distribute brochures and legal information regarding the protective-order process. For information, contact Kenneth L. Alger at Kennethalger@shentel.net.
- The **Emergency Legal Services Program** offers lawyers the opportunity to provide pro bono assistance to Virginians affected by mass emergencies and disasters. In a joint effort with The Virginia Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, the

Emergency Legal Services Program was modeled after the American Bar Association’s Disaster Legal Services Program. The program creates and maintains a network of volunteers trained in disaster-related legal needs. The volunteers deliver emergency legal services when a disaster is declared. For information, contact Jeffrey H. Geiger at jgeiger@sandsanderson.com.

- In the **No Bills Night** program, lawyers answer Virginians’ legal questions for free. The program began in Richmond in 1984 and has grown statewide. Several programs are broadcast on local television stations. For information, contact Darren W. Bentley at bentleyd@clementwheatley.com.

Not only does pro bono work fulfill attorneys’ professional obligations, but pro bono work offers young lawyers a way to assume greater responsibility, gain confidence, and grow professionally.

¹ Rule 6.1 states that “[d]irect financial support of programs that provide direct delivery of legal services to meet the needs described . . . is an alternative method for fulfilling a lawyer’s responsibility under this Rule.”