

# Pro Bono Service in Private Practice: Where and Why to Fit It In

**This article explores a few of the many benefits of pro bono service for private-practice attorneys, including professional development and economic benefits for your firm that may go unnoticed, and where to fit pro bono service into your practice.**

BY ASHLEIGH M. HACKER

For all legal-service providers, the same main principle applies: we strive to advocate for and serve the interests of our clients. But in private practice, built on retainers, invoices, and billable hours, how do we make room for those who cannot afford to pay? Why should you add pro bono service to your already busy practice, when collections are the measure of productivity and growth opportunities for attorneys? How can you “sell” pro bono services to the partners at your firm?

While we know that offering pro bono service allows us to use our unique expertise and knowledge to better the lives of individuals and communities, there are also professional development and economic benefits for your firm that may go unnoticed. This article explores just a few of the many benefits of pro bono service for private-practice attorneys and where to fit pro bono service into your practice.

Many of the examples in this article are focused on family law, which is a practice area with one of the greatest needs for pro bono assistance in Wisconsin. Family law clinics are frequently overwhelmed with long lines, and people who have patiently waited for over an hour might not get an opportunity to have their questions answered. Their only option is to return the next week, arriving even earlier to ensure a spot in front of a volunteer attorney before their next court date. This problem is even more pronounced in rural counties where fewer attorneys practice, leaving an even smaller network of professionals providing pro bono service. While family law has a particularly strong need, pro bono service can, and will, benefit private-practice attorneys in any field.

## Networking

Whether working in a legal clinic or directly representing a client, pro bono work affords the opportunity to work alongside other attorneys. In a legal clinic setting, you will volunteer with at least one attorney, but often more. The more time you spend volunteering, the more organically your network of attorney connections will grow.

In family law and other civil litigation settings, interactions with colleagues are often shaped by the adversarial nature of the work. Each attorney has a client whose interests their attorneys represent. Attached to those interests



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are an array of intense emotions and escalating conflict. This structure limits opportunities to work *with*, rather than against, your colleagues in the context of providing direct legal service to an individual. It is a rare occurrence in many practice areas to work together with a colleague outside your firm to solve an individual's problem, free from the backdrop of competing interests. This opportunity to combine efforts and experiences toward a common goal builds a sense of camaraderie and connection that can benefit you and your client on your next paying case. We all feel more confident taking on new cases when we are familiar with the opposing counsel. Having previously worked together "on the same side" can build efficiency and increase the likelihood that you may be able to reach a resolution without costly litigation, resulting in a happy client, who may eventually become a prosperous referral source.

Beyond that, nearly all of us have received calls about cases we would like to take but simply cannot fit into our schedules. When those matters involve issues that you recently handled alongside another attorney during a pro bono clinic, that connection can benefit both attorneys: your colleague may think of you as a trusted referral if they cannot take a case themselves – or they may become someone you feel confident referring a client to when your own capacity is limited. In this way, pro bono service naturally builds a referral network grounded in shared experience.

Moreover, if you choose to take on a pro bono case and provide full representation, the networking benefits remain. Sometimes a pro bono case exposes you to different legal practitioners or stakeholders that you would not have otherwise met. For example, as a family law practitioner, taking on a new pro bono client may connect you with a new

therapist specializing in high-conflict familial situations. That therapist may become a resource, and eventually that resource may become a referral source.

### Opportunities for Free Training in New or Specialized Practice Areas

One beauty of pro bono service is that we are all qualified to do something, even if our pro bono shift is our first experience with any given area of law. The previous article in this series, "Pro Bono: If You Don't Do It, No One Else Can" (*Wisconsin Lawyer*, March 2025), touched on lawyers' ability to do more than we know in the context of pro bono service, even outside our day-to-day practice areas. Pro bono legal clinics often have present a clinic coordinator or other practitioner who can prepare you for the duties you will perform at the clinic. Many clinical opportunities provide and encourage the use of standard forms, including circuit court forms and how-to fact sheets created by expert practitioners in the area. Whether learning how to complete a name change, working through a simple divorce case, or assisting with basic estate planning, each new legal skill or process practiced during your pro bono shifts can be developed into a new area of practice offered at your firm. For attorneys looking to expand into family law practice, the plethora of court forms and how-to sheets you find in your pro bono work can easily serve as building blocks to a more robust understanding and practice.

Pro bono service can also help grow your expertise within your current practice area, opening the door to new client opportunities. Many individuals seeking pro bono service are navigating an unfamiliar landscape that is undoubtedly overwhelming and intimidating. For this reason, they are grateful for anything you can do to set them on the right path. This creates space for expanding your knowledge in a manner that may not be available in traditional fee-based representation. For example, at a family law clinic, you may handle many cases with immigration issues,

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slowly building on your knowledge and skill base. As that skill base expands and is shared with other practitioners, you could eventually become the go-to hire for family law matters with immigration aspects.

For attorneys practicing in smaller firms, pro bono service can be a major benefit to your firm by helping to expand services and create new opportunities for growth. Your pro bono service could be the reason your firm adds simple family law matters or basic estate planning to the services provided. The cost of your training was your time, and that time also serves your community and your firm's reputation within it.

### Exposure to Novel Legal Issues and Skill Development

Pro bono service also sharpens your skills by exposing you to new and unfamiliar legal issues within your everyday practice. As society changes, so do the issues confronting families in the midst of separation. You may spend your shift at a legal clinic helping a client craft their proposed parenting plan to address concerns regarding a child's portrayal on the other parent's social media profile. Or you could help a parent calculate child support with a complex placement schedule that crosses state lines. You could even find yourself helping a stepparent petition the court for placement of a child after the death of their biological parent. Chances are, you will confront those same issues in your regular work, and your pro bono service may be the first time you do. The practice of explaining these legal topics to a layperson in your pro bono work improves your ability to translate legalese into plain language. It also improves your ability to creatively solve problems because one solution will not fit every case. The less time you spend developing your knowledge of issues in your regular practice, the more time you can devote to billable work.

Ultimately, your pro bono service presents a chance to practice effectively

building rapport with a stranger, identifying their goals, and addressing them, all within a relatively short timeframe. Family law practice develops these skills, as the nature of the practice is immensely personal. From a firm-marketing perspective, the soft skills developed through pro bono work are the same ones that help you build connections at events aimed at attracting new clients or referrals.

### Fitting Pro Bono Service into Your Practice

While the State Bar of Wisconsin provides many ways to explore pro bono opportunities in your community, legal clinics are often designed with accessibility in mind – not just for clients, but for attorneys as well. Many legal clinics operate over the lunch hour, after hours, or on weekends to accommodate client and attorney work schedules. For example, the Family Law Assistance Clinic (FLAC) in Dane County is two and a half hours on Wednesdays over an expanded lunch hour. Attorneys generally volunteer once per quarter. That relatively small time commitment – about 10 hours annually – can allow you to serve as many as 40 individuals in need.

Outside of a legal clinic context, full-scale pro bono representation may seem daunting. But it can be manageable with clear and reasonable boundaries, such as committing to just one pro bono case at a time. Any pro bono service is better than no pro bono service.

### Pro Bono Service in Small Firms

For attorneys practicing in smaller firms, pro bono service can be a hard “sell.” With fewer billing staff members and many of the same required overhead costs, there may be less flexibility for attorneys to devote time to performing nonbillable work. However, if pro bono service can be reframed as an opportunity for marketing, this perception may change. Pro bono service is an upfront investment of time that could expand opportunities for new cases, new practice areas, and, eventually, new avenues for profit.

Additionally, attorneys in small firms often enjoy greater autonomy. If you can personally make room for one more case, there is a good chance your firm leadership will support it. And who knows – that single pro bono matter might open the door to new services, additional attorneys, and broader firm growth. **WL**

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