

THURSDAY FRIDAY MONDAY TUESDAY **TODAY**

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Make a resolution to be a part of the solution

By Amy Fitzpatrick

There is a crisis in the civil legal system and every California lawyer can and should be a part of the solution. When making your New Year's resolutions, consider including pro bono service as something you wish to accomplish in 2102. If each attorney committed to supporting volunteer legal services, the crisis we now face could be averted.

In November and December of this year, four hearings were held across California, co-sponsored by the California Chamber of Commerce, the California Commission on Access to Justice, and the State Bar, to demonstrate how cuts to both courts and legal help for low-income residents put our livelihoods and our freedoms at risk. The hearings highlighted the fundamental role of the courts and free legal assistance in our society and explored the devastating effects, especially for low-income Californians, of chronic underfunding and recent budget cuts.

The hearings specifically examined how cuts in funding for the civil justice system can threaten efficient and effective use of taxpayer dollars and the protection of rights and equal treatment; imperil access to basic life necessities, including housing, education, and social services; and create barriers for the effective work of business, professionals, and foundations. (For more information, visit www.californiahearings.com.)

Because of our unique training, lawyers fill a void by volunteering that others cannot.

Just one day before the first hearing, the U.S. House and Senate conferees agreed to cut the Legal Services Corp.'s (LSC) overall funding by 13.9 percent and funding for basic field grants by 14.8 percent. In California, 11 organizations are funded by LSC, the largest funder of civil legal assistance in the nation. This is not the first cut to such funding, and it will not be the last. In a society where an estimated 63 million are eligible for legal aid - including 22 million children - and 80 percent of the need goes unmet, cuts will only continue to feed the crisis we already face.

Each California attorney has an opportunity - and many would argue a responsibility - to help. Because of our unique training, lawyers fill a void by volunteering that others cannot. The American Bar Association has set a goal for each attorney to donate 50 hours annually to pro bono service. Realistically, each attorney isn't going to be able to hit such a mark each year. But in the years when a lawyer can't volunteer to take on a case, there are other ways to help.

Many legal services organizations throughout the state offer clinics during the evenings and on weekends. Volunteering for one three-hour shift each month can make a big difference in the lives of the people who depend upon such clinics for assistance. Training is available, so if your practice area doesn't mirror a specific needed service, that shouldn't be a deterrent.

Making a financial donation to a legal services organization is another way to help. Attorneys shouldn't view this as a way to avoid their obligation, as no donation can replace the value of giving of your expertise. However, if time is truly a constraint, a financial contribution can help legal aid organizations hire staff attorneys and otherwise extend services to the underserved.

Law firms can help by creating a culture where pro bono service is respected and rewarded. Many law firms throughout the state are rewriting their pro bono policies to make it easier for attorneys to meet both their employment and pro bono commitments.

It's not just the clients who gain reward through pro bono service. Attorneys who volunteer find great benefits also. According to Andrew Kessler, a San Diego attorney who provides pro bono services to victims of domestic violence, "Pro bono work has also allowed me - perhaps forced me - to see the emotional side of practicing law, which is not necessarily found in other areas. Domestic violence work is riddled with emotion - the facts surrounding the representation are profound. It is also full of rewards. Knowing you have helped women and children who have faced abuse every day move on to a new life without fear is indescribable."

Take the first step now. While you read this, there are victims of neglect, homelessness, and domestic violence waiting for you to take action. Seniors, veterans, children, and HIV/AIDS sufferers are looking for help that only you can give.

The first step in achieving your resolution of doing pro bono work is as easy as going to your computer. Contact a free legal services non-profit organization near you to find out how you can help. You can find a statewide list of providers at www.CaliforniaProBono.org.

In 2012, be a part of the solution. Please - volunteer.

Amy Fitzpatrick Esq. is the executive director of the San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program Inc. With a staff of 20 and 400 volunteers, each year San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program provides legal services to more than 6,000 individuals.