“By taking on pro bono work, you will grow as a lawyer and develop your skills, all while helping someone in need.”

Pro bono publico is a phrase derived from Latin, meaning “for the public good.” A lawyer’s responsibilities as identified in the Model Rules of Professional Conduct include being a representative of clients, an officer of the legal system and a public citizen having special responsibility for the quality of justice. Consistent with that, Nevada Rule of Professional Conduct 6.1 prescribes that every lawyer in Nevada has the responsibility to assist in providing legal services to those unable to pay. Nevada lawyers are to aspire to render at least 20 hours of pro bono legal services each year and are required to file an annual pro bono reporting form.

We may all recognize that this is a good thing to do and that, given the special training of lawyers and the complexities of the system, we should help provide assistance to those without that knowledge, regardless of their ability to pay. Additionally, however, pro bono legal work provides a unique and valuable opportunity for training young lawyers. The attorney can get cherished courtroom time and hearing experience that he or she may not otherwise see for years in private practice. Indeed, if you take a pro bono case under the Nevada Supreme Court’s program, similar to the Ninth Circuit Immigration program, you are guaranteed oral argument. There is no substitute for such practical, hands-on experience. By taking on pro bono work, you will grow as a lawyer and develop your skills, all while helping someone in need. Talk about a win-win situation.

Of course, the opportunities do not end there. As you might imagine, particularly in today’s challenging economic environment, there is an increasing need for pro bono services in many areas of practice. So, I encourage you to take the initiative and find an opportunity that is a good fit for you, your interests and your developing practice. Here are just a few examples of those opportunities:

Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevadans (VARN) provides free CLE opportunities in exchange for your commitment to do pro bono work, and even an opportunity to work with a mentor if you are inexperienced in the area of law at issue in the case. Cases cover a wide range of practice areas including divorce, adoptions, bankruptcy, guardianships, name changes, wills, probate, foreclosures and other real estate matters, homesteads, labor law/worker’s compensation, tax issues and business/corporate matters (non-profits).

Washoe County After Hours TPO Hotline is a program run by Judge Bridget Robb Peck. It provides an emergency helpline for victims of domestic violence. Please contact Peck to volunteer to take the TPO phone for a week. She will ensure that you have the necessary training to handle the calls. Each volunteer has the hotline phone for one week – Friday to Thursday. The hours are Friday, 5 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.; and Monday to Thurs., 5 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. The initial calls are screened by an answering service and then forwarded to the TPO volunteer.
Nevada Legal Services (NLS) has a tenants’ rights center in Las Vegas that provides legal advice and brief service to tenants regarding a wide range of issues including evictions, HOA issues, habitability issues, mortgage foreclosures, utility shutoffs and illegal lockouts. NLS staff provides training on residential landlord/tenant law, mentoring and supervision. Nevada Legal Services also has a senior helpline which provides legal advice and brief service to seniors throughout the state. Helpline staff-members provide assistance on issues including consumer law, fraud and scams, health law issues, family law issues, estate planning and housing issues. Volunteers provide legal advice and brief service to Helpline callers and NLS staff provides training, mentoring and supervision.  

1 Nevada is one of 10 states to adopt the modern ABA Model Rule 6.1 word-for-word or with minor modifications. Another 15 states have adopted a version of the 1993 Model Rule 6.1, with a focus on the 50-hour aspirational goal and specific ways to satisfy a lawyer’s pro bono responsibility. A few local bars even make pro bono service a condition of membership: Saratoga County Bar Association, New York; Orange County Bar Association, Florida; El Paso Bar Association, Texas; McDonough County Bar Association, Illinois; and Tallahassee Bar Association, Florida. See “Supporting Justice II – A Report on the Pro Bono Work of America’s Lawyers,” ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service (Feb. 2009).