



# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

BY PAUL MATTEONI, ESQ., PRESIDENT, STATE BAR OF NEVADA

## Pro Bono – Commitment for the Public Good

A special thanks to the many contributors and authors who provided input for this month's content related to family law and domestic relations. In general, the practice of family law consists of a body of statutes and case precedents that govern the legal responsibilities between individuals who share a domestic connection. This field of practice is perhaps the most challenging and is constantly evolving. Above all others, this is certainly the area of law that directly affects many of our friends and family members.

The practice of family law includes marriage dissolution, annulment, child custody and paternity, guardianships, adoptions, termination of rights, emancipation and many more. Due to the emotionally charged nature of many family law cases, the advice and guidance of competent legal counsel remains a vital necessity – for those who can afford such assistance.

For a significant number of our attorney members, the practice of family law is a true calling. These members toil day-after-day to assist clients in need of both legal representation and life counseling during their most trying times. For many other members, the challenge of handling a domestic

relations matter is only a periodic or sporadic occurrence. And for a third sector of our members, the only domestic matters they address result from their willingness to accept pro bono matters. To all members who have undertaken pro bono domestic matters: a sincere “thank you” for your support of the many individuals and families in need of such legal representation. For those members willing to volunteer their time and skills to assist in domestic matters, the appreciation is immeasurable. Pro bono assistance is a professional duty and obligation for each of us.

The term *pro bono* has often been misinterpreted by many of our members who believe the term means “for free.” However, modern culture has chosen to shorten the original term and thereby morph its meaning. In its native form, the correct term is “pro bono publico” – which translated means “for the public good.” This Latin phrase references professional work undertaken voluntarily and without payment. Unlike traditional forms of volunteer activities, *pro bono service is based on the skills maintained by professionals* that are provided to those unable to make payment for the services.

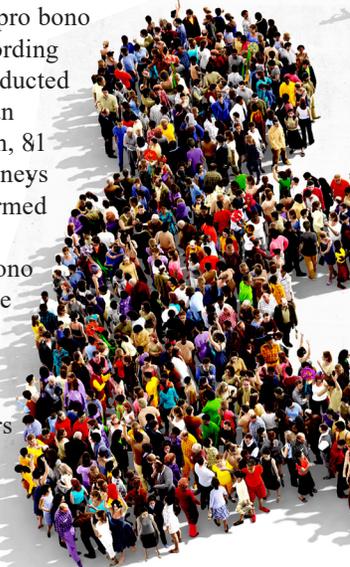
Each of our members maintains a professional and ethical obligation to provide pro bono services, which begs the question – are each of us doing our part to provide these pro bono services “for the public good?”

Certainly more assistance is needed. The *Nevada Statewide Study*

*of Legal Needs and Economic Impacts* determined that approximately 76 percent of legal needs in our state go unmet. In addition, the 2017 Justice Gap Report prepared by the Legal Services Corp. found that 86 percent of civil legal problems reported by low-income Americans across the country received inadequate or no legal help. Similarly, the State Bar of California just released its 2019 Justice Gap Study, which revealed that low-income residents received legal help in only three out of ten problems that could have been legally actionable.

Each of these independent studies reach the same conclusion – the professional skills maintained by our members are sought after and critically needed by those within our communities!

Certainly, many of our members are active participants in pro bono activities. According to a survey conducted by the American Bar Association, 81 percent of attorneys surveyed confirmed that they have provided pro bono services at some point in their careers. As expected, the number of hours committed to pro bono activities by



attorneys varies depending upon the type of matter. The study confirmed that an average of approximately 37 hours of pro bono service were provided by individual attorneys on an annual basis, with approximately 20 percent of the respondents confirming that they committed in excess of 50 hours per year to assist those in need. Interestingly, lawyers in the 70-74 age group provided the most hours of pro bono service on average, followed by lawyers in the 75-79 age group. Lawyers in private practice provided more pro bono service than those employed as in-house counsel or in government positions.

In Nevada, as in other states, the role of our legal service providers is paramount in serving those of limited means. As a profession, we all respect the efforts of our various legal service providers such as Nevada Legal Services, Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, Washoe Legal Services, Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevadans, Southern Nevada Senior Law Program and others. These groups, in conjunction with the

efforts of our members, endeavor to provide free legal services throughout the State in an ever-growing array of areas including, but not limited to, family and juvenile matters, consumer matters, employment and work-related issues, housing and discrimination claims, bankruptcy, public benefits, senior assistance and immigration.

It's no surprise that the number of individuals seeking pro bono services across our State is growing at an exponential rate. Even with IOLTA funding, grants and private donations, our legal service providers are stretched thin. These dedicated agencies and their attorneys are forced to turn away literally hundreds of matters each year due to limited resources. The justice gap remains a real and ongoing problem.

Within our State, entities such as the Access to Justice Commission and the Nevada Bar Foundation work tirelessly to assist in providing much-needed resources to our legal service providers. The Nevada study mentioned above concluded that every \$1 invested in legal aid provides a \$7 return to the community. A great

“thank you” to these entities and all our members who commit their time, energy and resources in support of pro bono matters.

Please continue to work for the public good – the true meaning of “pro bono publico.” The benefits are immeasurable. For all of us that have undertaken pro bono projects, we are each aware of the gratitude and appreciation received from those we assist. In addition, promoting pro bono for young attorneys is imperative as it builds the foundation for years of volunteer activities. Pro bono work provides young attorneys with the opportunity to work directly with clients, as well as gaining experience and confidence.

Active participation in providing pro bono service is imperative and is certainly for the “public good.” Attorneys licensed to practice law in Nevada must commit to serve those less fortunate and who struggle within our communities. Whether employed in private practice, as in-house counsel or in a government position, we each must make a commitment to serve those less fortunate.

As part of this commitment, please consider participating in the Dues Check-Off campaign (“Check *yes!*”) when completing your upcoming dues payment for 2020. Each member will have the opportunity to make a small donation to either the Nevada Bar Foundation or to pro bono legal service providers. Your small donation really does make a *big* difference!

As the weather turns colder, let all the members of *our* Bar remember those within our communities who struggle to make ends meet. Please continue to support the pro bono activities throughout our great State and continue to support *our* Bar. Be safe and make sure to take a bit of time to enjoy some football, the crunch of leaves beneath your feet, the smell of a freshly lit fire, and the Thanksgiving celebration! **NL**

