

ISBA Bar News

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Spotlight on pro bono

Full-time or of counsel, law firm volunteers help less fortunate clientele

Each year, hundreds of Chicago-area attorneys donate valuable time to promote equal access to justice for the poor by volunteering for legal aid efforts such as the Private Attorney Involvement Project of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (LAF).

Most volunteers in the project provide pro bono service in a select number of cases while working full-time at their law firms. Some of the most dedicated volunteers are those sharing retirement days with those less fortunate.

One example is John J. Held, who received his juris doctorate from Georgetown University in 1965. After clerking for Judge Joseph R. Jackson of the U.S. Court of Customs and Patent Appeals, Held worked with the Washington firm of LaBlanc & Shur and the Minneapolis firm now known as Dorsey & Whitney.



In 1970, he joined the Chicago firm that is now Banner & Witcoff. In 1988, he and five others from that firm formed McAndrews, Held & Malloy, where he has practiced intellectual property law with 84 other lawyers.

The ISBA Committee on Delivery of Legal Services, chaired by Richard Jay Hess of LAF, asked him some questions about his pro bono experience.

• How did you first learn about the Legal Assistance Foundation, and why did you decide to volunteer?

Held: I learned about LAF soon after I came to Chicago in the early 1970s. I became active in the CBA Young Lawyers Section and through my work with the section and my interest in pro bono activities, I became familiar with Chicago's pro bono community, including LAF, and met Sheldon Roodman.

As I began thinking more and more about retiring from my firm and the practice of intellectual property law -- and what I would like to do in my retirement -- I considered, among other things, doing pro bono work.

The more I thought about it, the more I believed that doing pro bono legal service would be a fitting and appropriate way for me to "pay back" my community for giving me the privilege of practicing law. After all, having my law license enabled my family and me to have a most comfortable living by my doing what I thoroughly enjoyed, practicing law.

I happened to see Sheldon on the train one evening and asked him about pro bono service opportunities at LAF. We talked and he referred me to Dick Hess, who in turn, introduced me to Bill Kolen, the supervisory attorney at LAF's North Suburban office.

Bill and I had lunch, and fortunately for me, he agreed that I might serve as a volunteer attorney at the North Suburban office. (I say fortunately because Bill has had to spend a lot of his valuable time mentoring me and teaching me a whole new field of law and about practicing in state court.)

• **As a volunteer, what kind of work do you do for LAF?**

Held: I presently volunteer at the North Suburban office once a week, on Wednesdays, while I continue on my path to full retirement from my firm. I would like to expand my volunteer efforts when I fully retire.

I primarily do intake interviews with clients in the mornings. Where and when possible, I follow-up in the afternoons with the clients to seek to resolve their legal problems, which may include problems other than those that brought them to LAF in the first place.

I also prepare pleadings (including discovery requests and responses) and briefs for various cases. I have attended and participated in hearings before administrative agencies and before state courts.

The hearings have been directed to a variety of different subjects, including unemployment benefits, social security benefits, domestic relations (primarily divorces), evictions and foreclosures.

The most personally satisfying matters have been those where we have helped clients avoid the consequences of unconscionably high interest rate payday loans and high monthly mortgage refinancing payments (some even higher than the client's gross incomes).

- **Why is this type of work important for people to participate in?**

Held: Hopefully I will not sound like I am standing on a soapbox, but I believe that the success and continuance of our justice system depends on the system working effectively and equally for everyone. Undeniably, the cost of the legal services provided by the private bar exceeds what many can afford, especially people who fall below the poverty line.

Agencies like LAF have done an excellent job of seeking to provide legal services to impoverished people, but their efforts have been hindered by ever lower levels of government funding and by the fact that private funding has failed to compensate for the deficiencies.

Unless members of the private bar recognize the need and accept their obligation (the quid pro quo to the public for the right to practice law) to assist in providing legal services to those who are unable to pay, a grave risk exists that the system will be discredited in the eyes of the public and ultimately may fail.

- **What has your volunteer experience meant to you?**

Held: I have found my experiences to be most rewarding intellectually and personally. Learning completely new areas of the law and discovering the ins and outs of state court practice has been stimulating and challenging.

(My private practice has been what many describe as a ivory tower practice, and my litigated cases were previously confined to the federal courts.)

Assisting people in need is always gratifying. Additionally, I find it most refreshing that invariably clients sincerely thank me for what I do for them and for the time that I have spent with them.

This is so, even though all too often I can do no more than patiently listen without being able to really solve their intractable problems as they, and I, would have liked. My experiences have also taught me to appreciate time in the context of spending time with clients and on their problems.

In private practice, I sometimes felt like Sisyphus, the legendary Greek king who the gods condemned eternally to repeat the cycle of rolling a heavy stone (counting for my time) up a hill each day, only to have it roll down again.

With LAF clients, I have had the ability to devote time to clients, to listen to them, without having to worry about how much time I was spending. This has been a most welcome difference.