

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Pro Bono at the NJSBA Reflecting on the Association's Vision of Public Good



Using the skills we have honed as trained advocates and giving back to at-risk individuals and groups who face a legal problem and cannot afford to hire an attorney is a fundamental part of being a New Jersey attorney.

The spirit of volunteerism of NJSBA members is evident in many ways.

It is apparent in the thousands of hours of service members give to the association each year planning and participating in meetings to address issues important to the profession and justice system. It is apparent in their participation in *amicus* matters and in offering expert testimony in Trenton. It is reflected in the generosity of our members who helped raise thousands of dollars for the Lawyers Feeding New Jersey campaigns to provide food for residents who don't have enough to eat. And it is clear in the activities and events its sections and committees plan, such as a recent one where members of the Minorities in the Profession Section volunteered for a day preparing and serving meals in a Hoboken homeless shelter.

As the leading voice of the profession, the New Jersey State Bar Association has made it part of its mission to help attorneys give back and help shape the professional regulations and obligations all attorneys have to perform *pro bono* service.

Some of the association's most visible efforts began in 1994, following a gas pipeline explosion that ripped through an Edison housing complex and left one person dead and over 100 homeless.

In the hours and days following the explosion, the NJSBA organized to help. Attorneys throughout the state volunteered to give victims legal advice about filing claims, gaining access to state and federal resources and replacing important documents lost to the fires of the explosion.

Just five years later, when Hurricane Floyd devastated sev-

eral communities, the association activated a toll-free legal advice hotline for residents and fielded dozens of calls about how to file insurance claims and more. That hotline has been a lifeline to many New Jersey residents facing the legal fallout of mass disasters.

In Aug. 2005, as the nation bore witness to the cataclysmic effects of Hurricane Katrina, members of the association came together to assist victims in need of legal help. Within days of the disaster, the NJSBA activated the hotline and distributed a handbook for evacuees of Hurricane Katrina relocating to New Jersey. The guide, authored by the McCarter & English law firm, not only covered issues related to disaster relief, but delved into everyday matters victims might encounter—such

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as obtaining a New Jersey driver's license or registering children for school in a new state.

The hotline was activated and legal guides were drafted for disasters that followed, including a 48-hour nor'easter in 2010 that caused severe flooding in more than half of New Jersey's 21 counties, as well as 2011's Hurricane Irene. It most recently came into use after Hurricane Sandy, fielding over 1,000 phone calls from affected residents. Members have again reached out to be of service to those who suffered in Hurricane Harvey and Irma, which ravaged Texas and Florida.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 brought a different set of challenges, but again the members of the state's legal community rose to the call to provide *pro bono* assistance. Within days of the attacks, the hotline was again activated, and staff members stood by, prepared with information on continued benefits and available financial resources, as well as on wills

and estate matters. The goal was to keep the families of victims in their homes and provide them with adequate support in the wake of such tragic loss.

Just a few years following, the NJSBA's Military Law and Veterans' Affairs Section requested that the association form a legal assistance program for servicepersons returning from post-2001 deployment. Today, the Military Legal Assistance Program offers legal assistance in family law, employment law and debtor-creditor law matters, and includes over 250 attorney volunteers from every county in the state.

In addition to providing avenues for attorneys to perform *pro bono* work, the association has included its voice in supporting the community of organizations and the courts that focus on volunteer attorney service. The association's *Pro Bono* Committee plays an integral role as

a forum to bring together leaders from the agencies and organizations around the state that focus on *pro bono* work. Each year, it shines a spotlight on the need for volunteers and the good work they can do in the community by celebrating the people and groups that give back. In addition, the committee examines the rules and regulations that guide attorneys and looks for ways to help attorneys get proper training and guidance to handle *pro bono* matters.

In 2011, the NJSBA formed the *Pro Bono* Task Force: Closing the Justice Gap, which examined the delivery of *pro bono* services in New Jersey and made recommendations about how to better coordinate the delivery of *pro bono* services in the state. Many of those recommendations were ultimately adopted by the courts.

And in 2012, the association became

part of the Statewide Disaster Legal Team, an initiative of Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, which also includes representatives from New Jersey law firms, as well as legal aid and government offices throughout the state. The group meets annually to assess disaster relief protocol from within the legal community.

In over two decades, members of the New Jersey legal community have assisted thousands through the bar's *pro bono* initiatives. Families have found relief. Victims have found solace. Members of the bar have responded to the needs of the public in a profound way, and continue to do so consistently when asked. And while exact facts and figures may lie buried within the organization's archives, the association echoes, in one resounding voice, the message people need to hear most in their time of need: "We're here to help." ㄿ

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