

Sooner Lawyer Archive

Volume 2015 | Issue 1
Spring 2015

2015

A Commitment to Public Service: Students' Pro Bono Opportunities Expand

Jonella Frank

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/soonerlawyer>



Part of the [Legal Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Frank, Jonella (2015) "A Commitment to Public Service: Students' Pro Bono Opportunities Expand," *Sooner Lawyer Archive*: Vol. 2015: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/soonerlawyer/vol2015/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sooner Lawyer Archive by an authorized editor of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Law-LibraryDigitalCommons@ou.edu.

A COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC SERVICE:

Students' pro bono opportunities

BY JONELLA FRANK

The concept of providing legal work pro bono publico is historically rooted in the desire that justice not be a commodity to be bought and sold. Rule 6.1 of the American Bar Association Rules of Professional Conduct begins by stating that “[e]very lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay.” At OU Law, that professional responsibility begins the moment students walk in the door the first day of orientation when they are invited to pledge to perform 50 or 100 hours of pro bono service during their law school years. This year, 97 percent of the entering 1L class made that pledge, with more than half of the students committing to 100 hours of pro bono service before graduation.

In spring 2004, a pro bono program was formalized at the OU College of Law. Initially named Students for Access to Justice, the student-driven organization

is now known as the Public Interest Law Student Association. The organization’s stated mission is to promote a culture of public service commitment by connecting students with meaningful pro bono volunteer opportunities. PILSA defines pro bono work as law-related and supervised by a licensed attorney. In addition, the work must be with a government agency, court, public interest organization or a private attorney handling a matter for free or at a substantially reduced fee.

PILSA helps students connect with qualified volunteer placement opportunities by working with the Office of Career Development to coordinate the Public Interest and Pro Bono Career Fair. Public service employers are invited to participate in the event held early in the spring semester. Students are able to visit with employers to learn about pro bono opportunities and submit their resumes for summer internships.



A student visits with representatives from the Department of Human Services at the Public Interest and Pro Bono Career Fair about pro bono service opportunities with the agency.

Prior to this year's fair on February 25, PILSA hosted a lunch and learn program on January 21 to provide interested students information about the fair and a variety of pro bono opportunities available. Students who had previously served in some of these placements described their experiences, answered questions and offered advice.

At the end of each spring semester, PILSA hosts a recognition reception for all students and faculty who have volunteered 25 or more pro bono hours during the academic year. Recognition also is given to the student from each class with the highest number of volunteer hours and the graduating

student who has volunteered the greatest number of hours during his or her law school career. All graduating students who have provided 50 and 100 hours of pro bono service are awarded cords to be worn with graduation regalia.

Since the inception of the pro bono program, students have volunteered more than 82,511 hours of pro bono service. Organizations or government entities that have benefited from the students' work include state and federal prosecutors' offices, public defenders' offices, Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Oklahoma Indian Legal Services, American Civil Liberties Union, U.S. Department of Justice Office of Tribal

**THE COLLEGE OF LAW
HAS FELLOWSHIPS THAT
PROVIDE FINANCIAL
ASSISTANCE FOR
STUDENTS WORKING
A MINIMUM OF 200
HOURS IN THE SUMMER.**

Justice, Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals and U.S. Agency for International Development. In addition to serving in positions in Oklahoma, students have completed pro bono service in Texas, Ohio, California, Florida, Washington, D.C., London and Ethiopia.

To encourage students to seek summer pro bono work, the College of Law has fellowships that provide financial assistance for students working a minimum of 200 hours in the summer.

**David L. Boren and Molly Shi Boren
Public Interest Fellowship**

**John Paul Stevens Public Interest
Fellowship**

**GableGotwals Public Service
Fellowship**

**Marjorie P. Maute Memorial Public
Service Fellowship**

**Cindy Foley Memorial Fellowship
Values Fellowship**

**Native American Law Students
Association Fellowship**

The number of fellows, and the amounts awarded, are based on availability of funds. More than \$55,000 will be available to assist students with expenses incurred while completing their pro bono service during summer 2015. To be eligible to apply for a fellowship, a student must secure unpaid summer employment with a public service or public interest organization. Students



VITA student volunteers Brooke Folsom and Karl Wert assist a taxpayer in filing her income tax return.

selected as fellows are introduced at the spring PILSA recognition reception.

In 2014, 26 OU Law students were awarded summer public interest fellowships totaling \$57,000. They completed 7,082 hours of pro bono service while working for a wide range of organizations. The students got hands-on experience drafting court opinions, serving as second chair at trial, participating in plea negotiations, researching and writing briefs and other documents, negotiating settlements and more.

Other student pro bono opportunities are available through two programs in which OU Law has participated for

a number of years. In 2006, OU law students began working in an Internal Revenue Service program, **Volunteer Income Tax Assistance**, in which help with filing simple federal and state income tax returns is provided to people whose annual income is \$53,000 or less. Before volunteering with VITA, students complete online training and pass a certification test administered by the IRS.

From late January until mid-April, on every Wednesday and Thursday evening, law students are present at the Norman Public Library Central to assist community members in preparing and filing their income tax returns electronically.



Margaret Hamlett Shinn from Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma Inc. conducts a LiveHelp training session for students interested in serving as LASO website navigators.

"In a typical year, about 25 OU Law students spend more than 500 hours preparing tax returns for about 400 low-income and elderly taxpayers," said Brooke Folsom, VITA student director. "These numbers help show how important this program is to the community, but it is also an invaluable learning experience for our volunteers."

In fall 2009, PILSA, then SATJ, began a program called **Victim Protective Order Assistance** to assist domestic violence victims seeking victim protective orders in the Cleveland County District Court. After completing training, law students staff an office at the Cleveland County Courthouse and guide individuals

through the process of obtaining the VPO. Students do not provide legal advice or representation, but do maintain strict confidentiality.

Since the program began, 293 student volunteers have provided 2,676 hours of service to assist 185 individuals seeking victim protective orders.

"Many petitioners have something traumatic happen that pushes them to fill out an application for a protective order," explained Matt Price, student program coordinator. "People come in really needing help organizing their thoughts. Volunteers in the program help provide

SINCE THE PROGRAM
BEGAN, 293 STUDENT
VOLUNTEERS HAVE
PROVIDED 2,676 HOURS
OF SERVICE TO ASSIST
185 INDIVIDUALS
SEEKING VICTIM
PROTECTIVE ORDERS.

clarity. It is comforting to have someone walk you through the process."

Price also points out that the benefits of the Victim Protective Order Assistance program run both ways. While providing a service to the community, law student volunteers gain valuable experience interacting with clients, adding another dimension to their legal education.

To increase the number of pro bono opportunities available to students, Professor Mary Sue Backus, director of experiential learning and academic support and PILSA faculty adviser, has attended training sessions for two new programs – The Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program and the Clemency Project 2014.

OU Law students began working with **The Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program** in fall 2014. The program provides veterans and other U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs claimants, whose appeals have been previously denied by the VA's Board of Veterans' Appeals, with free attorney representation in appeals before the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans

Claims. The consortium consists of four veteran service organizations: The American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, the National Veterans Legal Services Program, and Paralyzed Veterans of America. The consortium evaluates appeals for merit, and recruits and trains attorneys to represent claimants with meritorious claims.

OU Law students become involved when cases are assigned by the consortium to Backus as lead attorney. On the first assigned case, first-year students Ashley Goins and Jeremy Otis volunteered their time organizing the record, researching similar cases and preparing findings and conclusion for Backus to use in determining how to proceed in the case. They also observed a settlement conference and assisted in researching and writing the appellate brief.

Goins and Otis both have fathers who served in the U.S. Army, and for them, their involvement in the program had a strong emotional component.

“STUDENTS REPORTED WORKING 12,618 PRO BONO HOURS IN 2013-14, AND WE HAVE ALREADY EXCEEDED THAT FOR THIS YEAR.”

“The effects of war are often detrimental medically, socially and economically. U.S. veterans have risked their lives in the service of their country – in the service of us,” Otis said. “They are heroes, but sometimes they need help like everyone else. That’s where we step in. The Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program represents the people who need our help most.”

Goins expressed similar feelings. “The Army has played such a large role in my life, and I have seen the sacrifices military members make for their country up close. I am humbled to be able to give something back to them.”

The fact that this experience was available to them in their first semester as 1Ls was not lost on either student.

“My involvement in the program has also affected me professionally because I have been given a real-world legal experience in my first semester of law school! This opportunity is rare, and I am incredibly thankful to Professor Backus for allowing me to be involved,” Goins exclaimed.

Calling the experience “a rare opportunity to learn practical legal skills in the first semester of law school,” Otis went on to explain its potential impact on his future legal career. “After graduation, I’m hoping to apply to the Army JAG Corps. The experience I get from the Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program will definitely be relevant to the Army later.”

Clemency Project 2014 is a collaborative effort of the American Bar Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, Families Against Mandatory Minimums, the Federal Public and Community Defenders, and the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. It provides pro bono assistance to federal prisoners, who, had they been sentenced today, likely would have received shortened sentences. Potential clemency petitioners are identified and attorneys are recruited and trained to assist them in seeking clemency. Backus has completed training for the program and is exploring ways to involve students.

OU Law also encourages students’ participation in other organizations’ pro bono programs by making training easily accessible. In October, a Coats Hall classroom was the site for a training session conducted by Oklahoma Lawyers for Children. Forty students completed training to represent children in the juvenile division of the Oklahoma County District Court.

Another training opportunity was available in February when Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma Inc. trained students as LiveHelp volunteers who serve as LASO website navigators. Through live online chats, students help visitors to the LASO website locate information about civil legal problems.

As a member of Equal Justice Works, a nonprofit organization promoting public service for lawyers, OU Law sent students to the Equal Justice Works Conference

and Career Fair in Washington, D.C., in October. Through their participation in the two-day event, all four students found summer placements.

“Our student commitment to pro bono and public service is impressive,” said Backus. “Students reported working 12,618 pro bono hours in 2013-14, and we have already exceeded that for this year. That total doesn’t even reflect all unpaid work. For students enrolled in externships, PILSA counts only the hours they work in excess of the 140 required for externship credit. So the total amount of unpaid public interest and government work is even more impressive!”

PILSA’s successful promotion of a culture of public service commitment at OU Law is evidenced by these numbers.

Another example of how students have embraced the concept is illustrated by the story of the origin of the Native American Law Students Association Fellowship. To raise money to fund the fellowship, NALSA members procured in-kind donations from tribes and individual members, and held a silent auction during last year’s symposium presented by the *American Indian Law Review* and the OU Native American Studies Department. The student awarded the fellowship spent the summer working at the Department of Justice, Office of Tribal Justice in Washington, D.C. A second student organization, the Organization for the Advancement of Women in Law, will provide a summer fellowship in 2015



Volunteering can become a habit for OU Law students, even when the hours don’t count for pro bono credit. PILSA members Chance Counts, Monica Guziar, Zach Underwood, Morgan Pinkerton, Jessica Jacobsen and Foster Dobry stand outside the new home of the Center for Children and Families, where they volunteered to help get its new building ready by painting bathrooms.

to support a student working in the area of women’s issues.

OU Law students discover that by committing themselves to pro bono and public service they enhance their educational and professional development while serving people who need them and the legal services they are able to provide. In evaluating their pro bono placements, students made the following comments.

“I went to sleep every night feeling proud that I got to be part of an organization responsible for ensuring so many of the rights I get to enjoy every day.”

“[My internship] taught me things that cannot be learned in the classroom.”

“One of the most educational experiences of my life.”

“I know I will be a stronger advocate for my clients and a better practitioner because of this opportunity.”

“Working in the public interest sector, I was able to help underserved individuals who were in desperate need of legal services, which was often a matter of their survival. By utilizing the free legal resources provided by Legal Aid, I witnessed victims of domestic violence begin to feel hopeful, independent, and empowered.”

As these students learned, pro bono work can be good for the heart as well as the career. That lesson is a cornerstone of the OU Law educational experience. | **SL** |