

Spring 2012

pro bono program NEWSLETTER

by and for Michigan Law students

Issue 1



Michigan Law

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LAW SCHOOL



INTERVIEW

Susan Guindi, Assistant Dean for Career Planning, and Amy Sankaran, Pro Bono Director, sat down with 2L Allison Nichols to offer their thoughts on the pro bono experience at Michigan Law – how the program has evolved, what makes it special, and why everyone (yes, even students who are headed for firms!) should get involved this semester.

AN: To give us some context, let's start with your personal experiences with pro bono at the Law School. How has

the program evolved during your time at Michigan, and what are your roles in the school's pro bono efforts today?

SG: When I came to Michigan, I started in the Office of Public Service. Over the past fifteen years, I've seen the Pro Bono Program here grow and formalize. This has been a huge win-win for everyone involved—students, employers, and the community—and having a dedicated office and program director makes a significant difference in our ability to continue to expand the opportunities and resources available. Pro bono work is a wonderful personal and professional opportunity for our

students, and from a career planning perspective, it is certainly something that I encourage students to consider.

AS: When I was a law student here from 1998 to 2001, there were a number of

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take the pledge!

Michigan Law has a long tradition of serving the public. That's part of our heritage as a public school, and it stretches back to our beginnings in 1859. To celebrate Michigan Law's 150 years of producing lawyers committed to public service, we launched the Voluntary Pro Bono Pledge in Fall 2009. We ask students to voluntarily commit to performing 50 hours of pro bono service while enrolled at Michigan Law. The Pledge allows students to connect their developing knowledge to the world outside the Law School. In this way, they gain valuable legal skills while helping organizations in our community meet the needs of underrepresented individuals.

Directory of Student Org-Sponsored Pro Bono Projects

ACLU OF MICHIGAN - MICHIGAN LAW CHAPTER

Michigan Law's chapter of the ACLU links student volunteers with a variety of research and outreach projects related to civil liberties and civil rights. Generally, all law students are eligible to participate, but training and time commitment requirements vary from project to project. The ACLU's most recent project offering involved voting rights, while previous offerings have dealt with LGBT issues and more.

ENVIRONMENTAL LAW SOCIETY

Environmental Crimes Database
Participants assist Professor David Uhlmann in conducting the first ever comprehensive empirical study of environmental criminal prosecutions in the country. Students collect information and develop a database about such prosecutions, facilitating research and analysis about criminal enforcement, including discretionary factors that make environmental violations criminal and geographical disparities in criminal enforcement under environmental laws. Results will be published and shared with Congress, the DOJ, and the EPA. The project requires 5 hours per week; 1Ls, 2Ls, 3Ls, and LLMs are eligible.

FAMILY LAW PROJECT

FLP provides an opportunity for law students to obtain practical legal experience working with survivors of domestic violence. Under the supervision of an attorney, student volunteers assist with all aspects of case work including client interviews, drafting pleadings, and planning case strategy. All law students are eligible to participate; 2Ls and 3Ls are eligible to appear at court hearings. Volunteers must attend domestic violence training (provided once during the fall

semester) and office training (provided several times throughout the year) prior to volunteering on a project.

FOOD STAMP ADVOCACY PROJECT

FSAP volunteers visit local transitional housing and community centers to assist clients in completing applications for food stamps and other public benefits. Under the supervision of attorneys, volunteers also hold regular office hours at Legal Services of South Central Michigan to help clients navigate the public benefits system, serving as advocates to ensure clients receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

FUTURE ADVOCATES IN TRAINING

FAIT is a volunteer outreach program that seeks, through the development of mock trial teams: (1) to improve high school students' reading, writing, and critical thinking skills, and (2) to increase law student participation in surrounding communities through the mentorship of youth. The weekly time commitment can be anywhere from 2-10 hours. 1Ls, 2Ls, 3Ls, and LLMs are eligible to participate after 1-2 hours of training.

HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES

Human Trafficking Database
Efforts to combat human trafficking suffer from a lack of research, data, and analysis. The Human Trafficking Law Project database is the first publicly available database of human trafficking cases within the United States. This project allows students to participate in this first-of-its kind resource, gain legal research skills, and learn about human trafficking. 1Ls, 2Ls, 3Ls, and LLMs are eligible to participate, and must commit 5 hours per semester.

Jewish Family Services Project

Jewish Family Services is an Ann Arbor nonprofit that provides English language, immigration, resettlement and employment services to immigrants and refugees from around the world. For this project, law students volunteer to complete green card applications for JFS's constituents or plan and present various Know Your Rights presentations designed to educate Lawful Permanent Residents. Volunteer opportunities are generally on Fridays, and students can participate as many or as few times as they like. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls are eligible, and no training or foreign language skills are required (although Arabic, in particular, may be helpful in giving presentations).

Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project

This project seeks to assist Iraqi refugees living in the Middle East with worthy refugee and resettlement claims. Under the supervision of alumni attorneys, students work in pairs to file legal forms, including requests for reconsideration. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls are eligible to participate, but must attend training at the beginning of the year. 10-20 hours per semester are expected.

Mississippi Center for Justice Project

MCJ volunteers conduct policy research, help draft legislation, create consumer education materials, and assist with litigation projects on a variety of poverty law and consumer protection topics. Different projects arise each semester and require varying time commitments, up to a few hours per week. Previous projects have dealt with foreclosure prevention and the recruitment tactics of for-profit colleges, among other issues. Volunteers may have the opportunity to visit the MCJ headquarters in Jackson, MS, for a week of pro bono service over Spring Break.

LEGAL ALTERNATIVE BREAKS

LAWBreaks offers service-learning experiences for Michigan Law students during Spring Break. The trips are designed to provide a brief immersion into the human side of a pressing legal or social justice issue. Students will meet and work together with actors on many sides of the relevant issues, contribute to important social justice work, and have a chance to bond with fellow students outside of Hutchins Hall. This year's trips will be to the Arizona to work on U.S.-Mexico border issues, to New Orleans to work on criminal justice issues, and to South Dakota to work on Native American rights issues. Applications are due in the fall, and the trips are available to 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls.

MICHIGAN IMMIGRATION AND LABOR LAW ASSOCIATION

Michigan Unemployment Insurance Project

MiUI recruits and trains students to give free legal assistance to unemployed workers seeking UI benefits. Currently, with up to 79 weeks of UI available in Michigan, a denied claim represents a potential \$23,700 in lost income for that individual and his or her family. 1Ls with one semester of law school completed, 2Ls, and 3Ls are eligible, but must attend training. The time commitment is roughly 5 hours per week, depending on hearings.

WCWC Domestic Worker Advocacy

MILLA has partnered with the Washtenaw County Workers' Center (WCWC) to create a bilingual Know Your Labor Rights presentation for immigrant workers (particularly low-wage workers and independent contractors) in the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti area. Topics covered by the presentation include safety and health laws, unemployment insurance and workers' compensation, misclassification of employees, and wage theft. The presentation is still being written. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls

interested in helping with research, drafting the presentation itself, or presenting it to workers are eligible. The time commitment will vary according to the number of presentations available.

Know Your Rights: Latino Immigrant Community

The Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights (WICIR) and MILLA developed a bilingual English/Spanish PowerPoint presentation and accompanying handout to facilitate informational sessions for local immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented. Law students and community advocates present this information at churches, schools, and other public meeting spaces. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls are eligible to participate both in giving presentations and helping to arrange presentation opportunities. Spanish-speakers are especially desirable. The time commitment varies from semester to semester.

Know Your Rights: Arab Immigrant Community

MILLA is partnering with ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) to develop a Know Your Rights presentation geared toward the Arab American community. The format will be similar to our Latino KYR. The project is currently looking for students to help research the relevant law. MILLA will hold an informational session early in 2012, and hopes to train students to give the completed presentation at that time. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls are eligible. The time commitment will vary according to the number of presentations available.

Michigan Immigrant Rights Center

The MIRC focuses on helping undocumented immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence apply for U-visas. This type of visa is available to immigrants who assist authorities with the reporting and prosecution of crimes. In addition, MIRC works with clients who have claims under the

Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and other immigration issues. Students work on part of the U-visa process, communicate with clients about their cases, and interpret/translate. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls are eligible to volunteer, and generally commit at least 2 hours per week at the downtown Ann Arbor location. Spanish fluency preferred, but not required.

STREETLAW

StreetLaw links students with several organizations around the Ann Arbor area, where they provide legal education and more to elementary and high school age children, prisoners, the elderly, and sexual assault victims and counsellors. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls are eligible to participate; time commitment is flexible, and training requirements (if any) vary from site to site. Current sites include the following:

Ann Arbor Safe House

Members work with staff to educate both Safe House staff and high school student volunteers about sexual assault laws and other legal issues they may encounter in their work.

Bryant Community Center

Members visit this community center weekly to provide after-school programming for high schoolers. Members will lead mock trials and other lessons and games that engage high school students in different aspect of the law.

Green Baxter Community Center

Members visit this community center weekly to provide after-school programming for elementary and middle school students. Members spend the first half of each session teaching a law-related lesson, then help the students apply what they've learned through an interactive activity.

Juvenile Detention Center

Members educate teens at the Juvenile Detention Center about various legal

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student groups with ongoing pro bono projects, but there wasn't anyone within the administration formally responsible for helping students set up new ones. Nor was there any formal way for students to be recognized for their pro bono efforts. I was given the opportunity to become the Law School's first Pro Bono Director in 2008, and I leapt at the chance. In the fall of 2009, we launched the school's first ever Pro Bono Pledge, and now our students can track their hours and receive recognition for fulfilling the Pledge. But even more importantly, I am available to help students start new pro bono projects and provide institutional memory regarding past projects.

AN: We've heard from some students who think that pro bono is only important for those who want to pursue public interest careers. Should students looking for firm jobs get involved with the Pro Bono Program?

SG: Pro bono is fantastic for a lawyer's development, including and maybe especially for a lawyer going to a law firm. Through pro bono, students and new lawyers have the unique opportunity to take on real responsibility. For example, my only experience sitting second chair at trial was for a pro bono case. This is a great way to develop basic skills, and it's an opportunity to discover a passion for a particular area of the law and to forge contacts and network in that field.

AN: Wait a second...do you mean that law firms like pro bono? But students seem so concerned that it will make their resumes too "public interest-y" – won't that hurt their chances of getting firm jobs?

SG: The level of students' concern versus the level of the firms' concern on this issue – there's a big gap. Some of the things students may see as raising a red flag simply don't do so for legal employers, including law firms. Granted, some students might participate in pro bono work, discover a true passion in the public interest sphere, and end up pursuing an entirely different career path. But pro bono work still provides valuable experience to those students seeking opportunities with private law firms. There is certainly not an "iron curtain"

between the two. Our students are smarter than that. When you do pro bono, you can speak to knowing what it's like to be a lawyer, and firms see the value in that. I don't see a negative to it.

AS: It takes practice to become a good lawyer, and pro bono is one aspect of that. Pro bono work gives you a chance to gain skills that you might not acquire through classes, journals, or other standard law school activities. Then you can talk about the practical skills you've gained in interviews. All types of employers, not just public interest ones, want to hire lawyers with skills. Law firms value pro bono work, and it makes you a more interesting person during interviews to boot. Definitely a win-win.

AN: What makes pro bono at Michigan unique?

SG: This law school is a tremendous resource to the community, and the community is a tremendous resource to us. Through pro bono, the legal community helps to educate our students, and in return, we help them with their work. The variety of pro bono opportunities and depth of commitment expressed by our students and staff have created an ethos of public service.

AS: Our students, faculty, and staff have always been involved in pro bono work. When it comes to our students, scores have done significant public service in their past lives, and it doesn't stop when they get to law school. I think that one of the things that makes pro bono at Michigan unique is that our efforts are primarily student-led. There's a lot of passion here on the law quad. I (and many others) provide support and guidance, but the driving force always has been—and hopefully always will be—our students.

**Still have questions? Ready to get involved?
Contact Amy Sankaran at aharwell@umich.edu.**



Top left: Dialogue between students and staff helps the Pro Bono Program grow. **Bottom right, right to left:** Pro Bono Director Amy Sankaran, Public Interest Director Alyson Robbins, and Assistant Dean for Career Planning Susan Guindi.

Getting Involved: How to Choose Your Project

In this issue's interview, Pro Bono Program Director Amy Sankaran and Assistant Dean for Career Planning Susan Guindi debunked the myth that pro bono projects only provide useful experience for public interest students. Now that the secret's out about pro bono's benefits for *all* law students, those headed for firms and other private sector careers may be wondering which of the many available projects is right for them. There are a few factors to consider, but the most important is this: what sounds interesting? Simply participating in pro bono—regardless of the project—adds depth to students' resumes and provides valuable contacts in the legal world, so extensive strategizing is unnecessary. What's more, pro bono is a great way to get off campus and have fun, regardless of the career perks.

A second factor to consider is the type of work students would like to do—from interviewing clients to conducting policy research to filling out legal forms, the projects currently available offer something for everyone. Pro bono can help students develop a needed skill (struggle with public speaking? Sign up to give Know Your Rights presentations with MILLA), or students can utilize their strengths to fulfill a need in the legal community (speak Spanish? Help the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center connect with clients). Either way, taking

into account the nature of work students do in each project is important.

Finally, while the most obvious benefit pro bono provides is practical experience, it also gives students who are interested in a particular field of law, but aren't prepared to commit an entire summer to it, a great opportunity to explore. Pro bono projects introduce students to fields of law they might not otherwise encounter. In particular, students can explore family law, immigration law, labor and employment law, and poverty law through a variety of ongoing projects. Because many private sector attorneys remain committed to pro bono throughout their careers, exploring the fields of law with which disadvantaged populations regularly interact can help guide future pro bono choices.

Students that are still unsure about which project to join have a few options. First, they can contact project heads (email addresses are posted for every online project listing) to learn more. Second, they can contact Prof. Sankaran by scheduling an appointment online (she uses the same system as the career advisers), sending her an email (aharwell@umich.edu), or stopping by her office (303 Hutchins Hall). Finally, students that just aren't satisfied with their options are welcome to start a new project; again, contacting Prof. Sankaran is the first step.

PROJECT DIRECTORY,

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issues. Lesson plans are provided to volunteers each week, on topics ranging from the First Amendment, to Criminal Procedure, to Torts.

Parnall Correctional Facility

Members visit an all-male correctional facility about an hour away from Ann Arbor to work with the Michigan Prisoner

Re-entry Initiative. Members teach lessons on a variety of topics to prisoners who will soon be re-entering society. Common topics include employment and child support.

University Living

Members host one-hour discussion sessions with elderly members of an assisted living community. Past sessions have included mock law classes and debates on legal issues.

top five

**pro bono projects that
1Ls can join right now**

1. FAIT

FAIT is almost always in need of volunteers, and trainings are offered more frequently than for many other projects. Even though the semester is well underway, it's not too late to join!

2. StreetLaw

With six sites, StreetLaw has volunteer opportunities to suit a variety of interests, and 1Ls may join at any point in the semester.

3. Jewish Family Services Project

As accessible as they come, this pro bono project requires no training, no foreign language skills, and minimal time commitment. What's more, students generally volunteer on Friday afternoons, when reading assignments can certainly wait.

4. A research project

While the ACLU and Mississippi Center for Justice provide a steady stream of research projects everyone can join, other organizations also need 1Ls' help. Check the pro bono listings for current offerings, or email Amy Sankaran at aharwell@umich.edu.

5. A new project!

While all students are encouraged to start pro bono projects that align more closely with their career goals than those currently available, or that fill a pressing need in the legal community, 1Ls are particularly well suited to the task—they have enough time left at Michigan Law to both create and grow new projects.



SPOTLIGHT

This semester, we're putting the spotlight on 3L Ilya Feldsherov (second from right above), who has logged more in-session pro bono hours than any other current student: 200. Ilya's commitment to Future Advocates in Training (FAIT) has helped make the project the incredible success it is today. FAIT volunteers coach mock trial teams at local high schools. Here's what Ilya has to say about his experience:

"When a fellow law student reached out for more volunteers to coach high school mock trial my 1L year, I thought that would be a good opportunity to get involved with something new. I had never done mock trial before, but I helped the students practice their speeches and develop their trial characters. At the end of the semester, I was recruited to be a coach. I couldn't say no, and last year I continued learning mock trial as I went along. We had a lot of new students last year, and we had our work cut out for us, but with some great coaches and volunteers, the student team made it to the state championship for the second year in a row. I continue to be involved with FAIT this year as a 3L advisor, and I intend to help out as much as I can leading up to the regional competition in early March and (hopefully!) the state competition two weeks after that.

"I have learned a ton working with the students -- including the federal rules of evidence, which they know so much better than I do. I am always impressed by how incredibly intelligent and capable they are. All they need is proper instruction, structure, and support, and they can rise to meet any challenge. It is especially fulfilling to watch them win competitions and get into great schools (including Michigan!) Besides being very personally fulfilling, it is also really nice to get off campus and do something that is legally-based but not law-school related. This experience has been great at keeping me grounded. I really recommend that everyone give at least some of their time to pro bono—even an hour or two a week is meaningful."

Know a pro bono volunteer whose efforts deserves the spotlight? Contact Amy Sankaran at aharwell@umich.edu to share her story or to tell your own.

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