

PRO BONO LAW ONTARIO



Lawyers help thousands each year through pro bono projects

Each year, lawyers provide their time and effort to numerous, worthy projects, both within and outside of their profession. In fact, many provide countless hours of volunteer service within their own communities; while others lend their legal expertise to the public through organizations like Pro Bono Law Ontario (PBLO).

Hundreds of lawyers across the province register thousands of pro bono hours annually to help ensure that people have access to legal representation. And in acknowledgement of the benefits this work provides to the public, many law firms now have pro bono policies and are counting pro bono time towards their lawyers' billable hours.

Since it was launched in 2002, PBLO has been working to promote a pro bono culture in Ontario and to develop and broaden the pro bono capacity of the private bar. Today, lawyers from many law firms work in

partnership with PBLO to improve access to justice for low-income and disadvantaged people, as well as the communities and charitable organizations that serve them.

These growing efforts include the Child Advocacy Project, which provides access to lawyers, at no cost, to children and their families who are having problems in school as a result of conditions, such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, as well as those with behaviour that is symptomatic of physical and intellectual disabilities, bullying and harassment, and illegal expulsion. In 2007, lawyers involved in this venture helped the project's 300th child protect their right to a quality education in Ontario.

PBLO develops innovative programming such as urban renewal projects that focus on sustainable redevelopment of underserved neighbourhoods. PBLO has also recently developed a new project with Sick Kids Hospital called the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children (MLPC). This is an innovative model of patient care whereby legal advocacy and legal service delivery

are incorporated into clinical practice. Pediatric clinicians – doctors, nurses and social workers – are trained in legal advocacy then refer low-income patient families for legal services through an on-site co-ordinating lawyer. PBLO has recruited two large law firms to provide a wide range of legal services to patients and their families through this project.

PBLO also launched the Small Claims Duty Counsel Pro Bono Project a year ago to help unrepresented litigants attending Small Claims Court in North York. Over the past year, lawyers volunteering with the project have helped more than 1,100 people, by acting as free duty counsel. They provide litigants with summary advice, represent them at trials, hearings and settlement conferences, and even help them complete court forms.

“Law Help Centre” Launched

As a result of the success of the Small Claims Project, PBLO has just launched the “Law Help Centre” at Superior Court at 393 University Avenue, in Toronto. Designed as a self-help initiative, it is a two-year pilot program to support low-income unrepresented litigants who have the ability to represent themselves, with minimal legal assistance. Through the program, people will be provided with information about court procedures and processes – and pro bono legal assistance, if they qualify.

Located on the ground floor of the courthouse, the centre is open Monday to Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and makes available procedural information, form completion assistance, duty counsel assistance, as well as referrals to additional resources, for those that need it. PBLO has worked with the Ministry of the Attorney General, members of the judiciary, court staff and pro bono lawyers to prepare all the necessary information for the centre.

PBLO has also developed a roster of pro bono duty counsel lawyers who provide up to 30 minutes of pro bono assistance to each litigant.

“The legal culture has changed quite a bit since we started the organization,” says Lynn Burns, PBLO Executive Director. “We’re very pleased that so many law firms have stepped up to the plate by adopting pro bono policies and are donating lawyers’ time to these important projects. The response to our calls for assistance with projects like the Law Help Centre has been overwhelming. You can tell that the profession at every level is committed to improving access to justice in Ontario.”

For more information about PBLO and its many initiatives, visit www.pblo.org.