

## Pro Bono and Community Service: More Than Just ‘the Right Thing to Do’



**Lawyers have a professional responsibility to use their status and station to foster equality in the communities that they serve. This responsibility also extends to acknowledging and remedying the lack of diversity in our own profession.**

By **Gloria R. Melunis** | **October 20, 2021** | **The Legal Intelligencer**

I keenly remember my ears popping as I ascended to the 50th floor of the Comcast Center, my anxiety level climbing with each passing floor. It was the summer after my first year of law school, and I was reporting for my first day of my internship. I was fortunate—not many 1L summers have the chance to experience the inner workings of a large in-house legal department at this juncture in their legal careers.

It was an opportunity afforded to me by a group of Philadelphia lawyers who recognized concerted effort is required in order to increase diverse representation in the local legal community. In forming the **Philadelphia Diversity Law Group (PDLG)** in 2001 and the flagship PDLG Fellows Program, these forward-thinking lawyers made real the chance for people like me to blossom as a colleague in the law—and planted a seed that expanded my view of pro bono service. It is one that remains.

“Pro bono” stems from the Latin phrase “for the public good,” and as learned individuals, lawyers are in a unique position to help further equality for all members of society—in myriad ways. Having a “pro bono outlook” challenges us to be ever mindful of the economic and societal barriers that adversely impact access to resources and the administration of justice, inside and outside courtrooms. But it wasn’t just one summer

internship that developed this mindset for me; it has been a series of experiences and opportunities that led me to more fully understand the intersection of pro bono, community service, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) work. Those experiences, lived and observed, crystalized and catalogued for me the modern lawyer's responsibilities in these spaces—as well as highlighted often overlooked benefits of such engagement.

The opportunity inspired me to consider ways I, too, could make the road in life easier for someone else, and I delved into pro bono participation and saw how it can have an impact on future opportunities—for both the client and lawyer. While at Rutgers Law, I participated in the Honorable Judith H. Wizmur Bankruptcy Pro Bono Project, which pairs students with volunteer attorneys to interview low-income clients and prepare and file bankruptcy petitions. The bankruptcy pro bono project directly touched the day-to-day lives of its clients—easing the stressors of relentless creditors and helping them achieve fresh starts. It also provided the volunteers a moment of perspective after learning the stories of folks gripped by poverty. Later, when I was invited to interview for a clerkship with a federal Bankruptcy Court judge, I could enter chambers with confidence, armed with real-world experiences that augmented the theoretical world of law school classroom discussions. I credit this pro bono experience for helping me secure my dream clerkship.

“As legal practitioners, there is no greater satisfaction than using your skills to change someone's life.” This was a sentiment shared by [Curtis B. Toll](#), managing shareholder of Greenberg Traurig's Philadelphia office, upon the exoneration of a wrongfully convicted incarcerated man, Theophalis “Bilaal” Wilson, after 28 years behind bars—the firm's pro bono efforts helped secure his release. There, the power of community-based and equity-focused legal service is irrefutable—it takes just one look at [Wilson's face as he exited the courthouse](#) to appreciate the impact this work had on Wilson and his family. Of course, as I learned early on when working with individuals seeking bankruptcy relief, the work does not need to be high-profile or headline-grabbing to have a meaningful impact on the community, particularly for those facing economic and societal barriers.

These same barriers have affected the legal profession, which remains one of the [least diverse professions](#) in the nation. To foster public confidence and judicial fairness in the legal system, it is crucial that legal practitioners engage with and reflect the communities they serve.

To address disparities, many educational diversity pipeline programs have emerged to teach students about the law, encourage them to pursue legal careers and offer guidance in that pursuit. According to a recent Association of American Law Schools' [Before the JD](#) study, 55% of law students—and 68% of Black law students—first considered law school before they reached college. This highlights the importance of advancing these programs with diverse high school students during the formative years when individuals begin to envision their future. [Street Law's Legal Diversity Pipeline Program](#) can be a great resource for those who want to get involved, matching law firm or in-house legal department volunteers with nearby, diverse high school classes. Some companies and firms even partner with each other to increase their capacity to serve more students, producing true win-win-win scenarios.

Those efforts to proactively foster diversity in the legal community continue to blossom, as many of these corporate legal-outside counsel partnerships increasingly are extending to various pro bono and community service initiatives. Thankfully, corporate legal departments and law firms are not left to navigate this work alone. There are well-established organizations that serve as incubators and collaborators for innovative ideas and solutions to achieve a more equitable and diverse legal profession, like PDLG locally, and the [Leadership Council on Legal Diversity \(LCLD\)](#) and The [Diversity Lab](#) nationally. The Diversity Lab advocates that corporate counsel transition from simply demanding diversity to taking action at the *individual* level to support advancement of diverse lawyers within their outside law firms; I'm proud to

note that the committed work of Greenberg Traurig has merited our firm Mansfield Rule 4.0 Certification Plus.

A recent [report](#) found that 21% of in-house legal departments have an existing outside counsel diversity program—a rate that is arguably low, given the mutual benefits these programs bring to the corporation, firm, and community. I was able to experience firsthand the rewards of partnering on such an initiative while working in-house. In order to ensure that diverse teams worked on its matters now and in future, the company I worked for built a pipeline internship program for diverse first-year law students in partnership with outside counsel and diversity organizations. The interns would split their time between the law firm and legal department, which helped strengthen these existing relationships. Each summer, the legal department was energized by the law students’ fresh perspectives while also fostering a pipeline of diverse talent with the institutional knowledge necessary to support future matters as outside counsel.

Opportunities for collaboration do not end at pipeline programs. Pro bono alliances are proving excellent ways for lawyers to come together to use their educated status to help further equality. Indeed, my firm has a long history of partnering with clients to provide needed legal services to refugees, children with disabilities and parents in family court.

When law firms and legal departments unite to take strategic actions like these, we can make real progress. Lawyers have a professional responsibility to use their status and station to foster equality in the communities that they serve. This responsibility also extends to acknowledging and remedying the lack of diversity in our own profession.

As a lawyer who has directly benefited from early DE&I advocacy, advancing this work is both professional and personal, so I feel obliged to pay it forward, to further these efforts. My lived experiences attest to the fact that the benefits of contributing to such initiatives go far beyond the obvious, feel-good tropes. They can help mold careers exponentially and transform both law and society definitively.

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