

The Making of a Chapter Pro Bono Program

AILA WASHINGTON STATE CHAPTER (and National Lawyers Guild) members Bob Gibbs, Dan Smith, and Kathy Weber set out in 1984 to create a coordinated Washington state immigrant pro bono program. Together, they formed the Joint Legal Task Force on Central American Refugees as an effort to organize pro bono representation for those fleeing violence in Central America. That effort grew to become the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP), an independent organization with a current staff of 25 that provides initial intake and screening for almost 17,000 immigrants a year from more than four-dozen language groups.

NWIRP just celebrated its 20th year of “advanc[ing] the legal rights and dignity of low-income immigrants in Washington State by pursuing and preserving their legal status through legal representation, education and public policy.” The program provides assistance with a variety of immigration matters, including: applications for political asylum; representation in removal (deportation) proceedings; petitions under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA); assisting immigrant juveniles; trafficking; and other immigration applications, including naturalization, family visas, and applications for replacement green cards.

Ongoing Chapter Activities

The AILA Washington State Chapter itself has grown dramatically since 1984 and has continued its active pro bono efforts. It has a long-standing pro bono committee of eight to 12 members, which provides a link between Chapter members and immigrant community organizations in order to facilitate pro bono services. The Chapter’s current activities include the following:

- In coordination with NWIRP and the King County Bar Association, the Chapter schedules immigrants for a weekly immigration clinic to which more than 20 Chapter members are regularly assigned;
- The Chapter works with University of Washington and Seattle University School of Law VAWA programs that pair law students and, mostly, Chapter lawyers to handle individual VAWA cases; and

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- It provides regular liaison and volunteer assistance to such organizations as NWIRP, Access to Justice Project (AJP), Volunteer Advocates for Immigrant Justice (VAIJ), Hate Free Zone, and the King County Bar Association Newcomer’s Project.

New Chapter Activities

The Washington Chapter’s recent activities include updating a resource guide to more than 60 Seattle-area immigrant services community programs in order to help determine how Chapter members can assist them. The Chapter then assigns volunteers to these programs. The effort put into updating the guide also will produce a document that can be distributed throughout the immigrant community to inform immigrants of available resources. Among other efforts:

- The Chapter recently surveyed its members to determine their pro bono interests and is designing a database so that lawyers can be matched with projects that fit their interests;
- The Chapter has established a pro bono expectations policy of 30 hours per year for

members, with a voluntary reporting form; it also has created yearly chapter pro bono awards that are announced at its annual conference;

- The Chapter now circulates, through its listserve, NWIRP cases that need representation, with a brief description of each case. AILA members can volunteer for cases online;

- The Chapter has identified a group of about 40 mentors who volunteer to assist less experienced lawyers in handling pro bono cases. As part of this effort, it coordinates with other groups to hold periodic training sessions for attorneys handling asylum and VAWA cases; and

- Finally, the Chapter is attempting to develop a low-bono program for low income qualified individuals who are able to pay some but not full fees. This is a potentially large group that does not qualify for existing pro bono programs, but cannot afford the increasingly expensive costs and fees of standard processing.

Many perfectly willing AILA members simply lack awareness of when and how they can help, or they lack the confidence in their ability to help. Widespread involvement in pro bono activities requires organized chapter commitment and communication. And although lawyers should, of course, engage in pro bono activity without expectation of recognition or award, the Washington Chapter is proof that a little recognition for effort and time spent can go a long way. 

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This is the third in a series of pro bono articles spearheaded by the AILA Pro Bono Committee.