



Insights: Perspectives

Takeaways | The Pandemic's Impact on Pro Bono

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10 KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Pandemic's Impact on Pro Bono

On March 9, [Kilpatrick Townsend's](#) Pro Bono Partner, [Tamara Serwer Caldas](#), spoke on a panel at the [2022 Pro Bono Institute Conference](#) in Washington, D.C. Ms. Caldas' panel addressed how changes in society and in the legal industry during the pandemic have impacted pro bono engagement and effectiveness, and what strategies large law firms should consider moving forward in response to some of these trends.

Here are 10 takeaways from the panel and subsequent discussion:

5 Challenges:

1

Departures make staffing a case difficult.

- Increased lateral movement, especially among senior associates, has made it difficult to maintain staffing on important pro bono matters. This is especially so when the departing attorney had taken a leadership role or was the primary contact for the pro bono client. There is likewise a risk of losing institutional knowledge in a particular pro bono area when a leader in that area leaves the firm.
- Attorney and staff departures have affected the legal services/nonprofit partner agencies as well.

The inability to meet with pro bono clients in person or attend community or court-based clinics has detracted from the learning and enjoyment of some types of pro bono projects.

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Court and agency backlogs caused by the pandemic and by understaffing and labor shortages means certain cases are taking longer to resolve.

The past several years (even before the pandemic) have felt like one crisis after another, which has led some attorneys to feel overwhelmed and burned out.

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Higher workloads and billable expectations of attorneys makes it difficult for attorneys to find time for pro bono, especially when they are also balancing family and other personal needs.

5 Opportunities:

Make staffing a priority.

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1

2

Set expectations.

- Firms need to be even more explicit about their commitment to pro bono clients on the front-end of the representation. Define (and possibly narrow) the scope of the representation as clearly as possible to set expectations.
- Both firms and legal services organizations should consider re-adjusting expectations about the scope of work and quantity of new cases the firm can accept in the near-term.

Firms that want to sustain and grow their pro bono contribution, especially in higher impact matters, will need to consider providing more billable credit and other professional incentives for projects requiring a greater commitment of time.

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Because quality of life, risk of burnout, and mental health issues are becoming even more salient within the legal profession, firms will need to demonstrate that pro bono time and contributions are valued by the firm in relation to professional advancement.

Firms should consider other vehicles for providing legal services to people who could not otherwise afford it such as creating fellowships at local legal aid organizations where they “second” an attorney for a period of time to focus entirely on the clients of that organization.

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