

Pro Bono News

Summer 2025 Edition

A Message from President-Elect Taa Grays



“Mere access to the courthouse doors,” Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall observed, “does not by itself assure a proper functioning of the adversary process.”

Justice can be illusory when one party has a lawyer and the other cannot afford one. For justice to be truly served, litigants must have competent counsel advocating for a just result. The Association’s commitment to making justice real is captured by our mission: being the leading voice for the profession by advancing access to justice. Through this mission, we enable our members to live our motto, “Do the public good.”

Through the President’s Access to Justice Committee, the Association lives its mission and enables our members to live our motto. In January and May of this year, the Committee emphasized the importance of pro bono legal services in New York State. “We are united by the belief that all people are created equal and entitled to liberty,” stated then President Domenick Napoletano at our May event. “Our justice system was built on that vision, where due process and equal justice under law provide equal standing between the wealthy and the indigent defendant.” The attorneys and organizations across the state that live this vision were recognized and awarded at receptions earlier this year.

The Association also supports partners with legal services organizations and volunteer legal programs on initiatives that help fill the justice gap. This month’s newsletter highlights the good work of those filling the justice gap.

Our bar leaders in Buffalo are doing the public good through its lawyer’s volunteer program. In her article, “Public Interest, Pride and Pro Bono,” Maria A. Valeri, Pro Bono Manager of the Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project, Inc., explains: “For the public good, lawyers do more than just provide free legal assistance; they contribute to the overall strength and well-being of the community in many ways.”

Our bar leaders downstate are doing the public good and leading others to do so also. In his article, “Public Lawyers Make Good,” Mark Weliky spotlights Kristen Dubowski Barba. Barba, a staff attorney at the Queens Volunteer Lawyers Project, became the youngest woman to serve as President of the Queens County Bar Association in May 2025. Her dedication to helping Queens homeowners facing foreclosure and her involvement in QCBA programs, including outreach to law schools and the CLARO Consumer Debt Clinic, earned her this recognition.

Although no longer actively practicing, 6,000 retired lawyers across New York State continue to do the public good through the Attorney Emeritus Program (AEP). In his article, Robert Mahony, AEP Coordinator, Feerick Center for Social Justice at Fordham Law School, celebrates the 15th Anniversary of the AEP and highlights the significant

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contributions of AEP in expanding access to legal services for underserved communities in New York over its 15-year history.

As a leading voice for the profession, NYSBA inspires attorneys across New York State to not only uphold the law but to strengthen the foundations of justice, ensuring that liberty and due process are realities for all. Through its unwavering dedication to advancing access to justice, the Association continues to “Do the public good.” All of these efforts help to shorten the bridge of the justice gap and create a legal system that truly serves every individual equitably.

Pro Bono Opportunities Guide

www.nysba.org/probono

Want to volunteer?

This easy-to-use guide will help you find the right volunteer pro bono opportunity. You can search by county, subject area, and population served.



Questions about pro bono service?

www.nysba.org/probono
(518) 487-5641
probono@nysba.org

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Public Interest, Pride and Pro Bono

By Maria A. Valeri, Pro Bono Manager, Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project, Inc. ("VLP"), Buffalo, New York



This past weekend, my coworkers and I participated in the Buffalo Pride Parade. What a remarkable experience! We were so uplifted by the reception from the community, and the countless shout-outs and "thank you"s received as we paraded down Elmwood Avenue with our VLP logo proudly displayed. We returned to work Monday invigorated from witnessing first-hand the resilience of our community members and their shared sense of hope, especially in these uncertain times.

Taking part in this event provided a sharp reminder of the importance of public interest pro bono work and the impact it has on society. Volunteer attorneys serve as a vital bridge between underserved populations and the legal system. "For the public good" lawyers do more than just provide free legal assistance; they contribute to the overall strength and well-being of the community in many ways.

1. Ensuring Access to Justice for All

The cornerstone of any democratic society is the principle of justice, but access to it remains unequal. Legal fees can be prohibitively expensive for many individuals, particularly those from low-income or marginalized communities. Without the ability to afford representation, people often struggle to navigate the legal system, leaving them vulnerable to injustice or exploitation.

Pro bono work helps level the playing field. By providing legal services at no cost, pro bono attorneys ensure that everyone, regardless of their financial situation, has an opportunity to be heard. This is especially important in cases involving housing, immigration, family law, and employment discrimination—issues that disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged individuals. VLP attorneys and pro bono volunteers practice and serve in all these fields and more.

2. Promoting Social Justice and Equity

Pro bono legal work often intersects with causes related to social justice, civil rights, and systemic equity. Many pro bono lawyers focus on issues such as domestic violence, asylum cases, racial discrimination, and human trafficking. By providing free legal counsel and representation in these areas, pro bono attorneys not only help individuals but also challenge systemic injustices that affect entire communities.

For example, an attorney who represents a family fighting unlawful eviction is not only protecting that family's right to housing but also sending a message that communities deserve to be treated fairly by landlords, governments, and the legal system. We are extremely proud of our hard-working eviction defense team and the pro bono attorneys that volunteer with them. Through their combined efforts, they contribute to broader efforts to combat poverty, racism, and inequality.

3. Fostering a Sense of Community and Civic Responsibility

When attorneys engage in pro bono work, they are not just providing legal services—they are also setting an example of civic responsibility. The practice of law, like other professions, carries with it an ethical obligation to give back to the community. By choosing to offer their time and skills for free, pro bono lawyers demonstrate the importance of serving the public good and inspire others in their community to get involved, whether through volunteering, donating, or supporting charitable causes.

This sense of shared responsibility can have a ripple effect, strengthen community bonds, and encourage a culture of giving. As more attorneys participate in pro bono work, others may follow suit, amplifying the impact on the community as a whole. See the links below to become a part of this important chain of volunteers.

4. Increasing Public Awareness of Legal Rights

Many people simply don't know what legal rights they have or how to defend them. By working with clients in underserved areas, pro

bono lawyers help educate individuals about their rights and the legal processes available to them. This empowerment is crucial not only for immediate legal problems but also for the long-term health of a community.

For example, a pro bono lawyer representing a tenant in a landlord-tenant dispute might not only resolve the immediate issue but also teach the tenant about their rights under local housing law. Similarly, an attorney working on a civil rights case can help a community recognize systemic injustices and inspire them to advocate for change. VLP's eviction defense and immigration units make a difference every day in these areas with the help of attorney volunteers.

5. Creating Positive Legal Outcomes for Vulnerable Populations

The legal system can be intimidating and confusing, especially for those who are already dealing with difficult life circumstances. Pro bono attorneys provide a sense of reassurance, helping clients to navigate complex legal processes with guidance and support. For many individuals, having a pro bono lawyer means the difference between winning or losing a case that could impact their livelihood, family, or future. In addition, positive legal outcomes help foster trust in the legal system and create a sense of justice for all.

6. Building a More Resilient Legal System

The legal profession itself benefits from pro bono work. Attorneys gain exposure to a diverse array of legal issues, expanding their knowledge and skills, which ultimately strengthens the legal community as a whole. In particular, younger, or less experienced attorneys can benefit from the mentorship and opportunities that pro bono cases provide, allowing them to develop their practice while making a tangible difference in the lives

of others. VLP offers multiple trainings for young lawyers or those with experience that are interested in trying something new. Our immigration referrals include mentor attorney support. Email mvaleri@ecbavlp.com for more information.

Law firms that promote pro bono work often find that it fosters a positive corporate culture and enhances their reputation within the community. Many attorneys report that their pro bono work is one of the most rewarding aspects of their careers. It helps them stay connected to their sense of purpose and reminds them of the broader impact they can have on society.

7. Strengthening the Social Fabric

Legal issues are often intertwined with broader societal challenges. From housing disputes to immigration rights, the cases that pro bono attorneys handle reflect larger issues facing society. By addressing these issues on an individual level, pro bono lawyers help create solutions that benefit everyone. For example, a pro bono lawyer who advocates for the rights of refugees or asylum seekers contributes to a community's values of inclusivity and compassion.

In this sense, pro bono work strengthens not just the individuals directly impacted but also the social fabric of the community. It sends a message that justice is not just a legal construct but a human right, and that communities must stand together to protect it.

8. A Vital Resource in Crisis Situations

In times of crisis, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, or public health emergencies, and of course the ongoing attacks on due process, legal issues often arise that require immediate attention. Pro bono attorneys play an essential role during these times by providing rapid legal assistance. Whether it's helping

families secure emergency housing, or helping noncitizens navigate immigration challenges, pro bono lawyers provide crucial support when communities are at their most vulnerable.

During such crises, pro bono attorneys not only help individuals solve legal problems but also contribute to the broader recovery efforts, helping their communities rebuild and move on from difficult situations.

Thank You

Pro bono attorneys are more than just legal professionals—they are community builders, advocates for justice, and champions of equality. Through their selfless contributions, they ensure that legal representation is not a privilege reserved for the wealthy, but a fundamental right for all. In doing so, they play an essential role in making communities stronger, more just, and more resilient.

As long as there are barriers to accessing justice, the work of pro bono attorneys will remain a critical force for good, helping to ensure that justice is not only done but also seen to be done for everyone, regardless of their financial means.

We are so deeply grateful for the time, energy, and commitment of our staff and the pro bono attorneys that volunteer with VLP. Your hard work and dedication make a real difference, and we couldn't do it without you. Thank you for your kindness and support – it means the world to us and to your community.

To volunteer your services:



To make a donation to VLP:



Save the Dates
**2026 PARTNERSHIP
CONFERENCE**
September 23, 2026 – September 24, 2026



Department of
Public Interest

AEP Marks 15 Years of Impact at Anniversary Celebration

By Robert Mahony, AEP Coordinator, Feerick Center for Social Justice, Fordham Law School



Left to Right (Standing): New York State Attorney Emeritus Program Advisory Council Members: Professor Natalie M. Gomez-Velez, Lauren Axelrod, Tanisha S. McKnight, Kathy Hirata Chin, Peter Kempner, Dean Emeritus John D. Feerick (Advisory Council Co-Chair), Adriene L. Holder, Christine M. Fecko, and Alan Rothstein

Left to Right (Sitting): Hon. Christine M. Clark (Advisory Council Judicial Co-Chair), Hon. Jonathan Lippman, Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson, and Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives Edwina G. Richardson.

The Attorney Emeritus Program (AEP) proudly commemorated its 15th anniversary at the May 7, 2025 annual meeting of the AEP Advisory Council. The ceremony honored the outstanding contributions of the program's founders; the longstanding, productive partnership between Fordham

Law School's Feerick Center for Social Justice and the New York State Unified Court System; and the thousands of senior attorneys who have dedicated their time and expertise to serve New Yorkers in need of civil legal services across the state. To mark the occasion, the AEP produced a commemorative video highlighting key program milestones and testimonials, available now at <https://vimeo.com/1088516495>.

The Honorable Rowan D. Wilson, Chief Judge of the State of New York and the New York Court of Appeals, and former Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman both offered remarks at the ceremony, underscoring the critical role the AEP has played in expanding access to legal services for underserved communities. Chief Judge Lippman, who established the program in 2010, praised

its enduring legacy and the growing community of Emeritus attorneys who continue to serve with distinction. Founding Advisory Council members were presented with plaques in appreciation of their long-standing commitment to pro bono service. All Advisory Council members and other distinguished guests also received specially designed AEP 15th Anniversary lapel pins—a symbol of appreciation and shared commitment to equal justice.

The AEP registered its first class of Emeritus volunteers in 2010, beginning with forty attorneys. Over its fifteen year history, the program has grown to include more than 6,000 senior attorneys who have elected Emeritus as part of their biennial registration or applied to participate in the program through the AEP website. Each year, nearly two hundred Emeritus volunteers provide on average more than ten thousand

hours of pro bono legal assistance through legal service organizations, court-sponsored programs, and other initiatives across the state. In the 2023-2024 fiscal year alone, Emeritus volunteers closed more than 2,000 cases and helped over 3,000 clients.

As the AEP enters its next chapter, the program remains focused on strengthening volunteer support and infrastructure, recruiting new attorneys, and amplifying the impact of Emeritus volunteers across all regions of New York—especially underserved rural, remote communities. To learn more or get involved, please visit <https://www.nysattorneyemeritus.law/> or contact the AEP program coordinators at aepcoordinator@fordham.edu or aep@nyscourts.gov.



ATTORNEY EMERITUS PROGRAM
NEW YORK STATE UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM

15th Anniversary

Public Interest Lawyers Makes Good!

By Mark Weliky

In 2012 when a recently admitted lawyer was hired by the Queens Volunteer Lawyers Project (QVLP) little could she imagine that it would lead to her becoming the youngest woman to become President of the Queens County Bar Association (QCBA). Well, it happened to QVLP staff attorney Kristen Dubowski Barba in May 2025 when she was sworn into that role.

Before coming to QVLP Kristen had been with Brooklyn Family & Housing Services (now Housing & Family Services of Greater New York) counselling Queens homeowners facing eviction. With that experience she was a perfect fit for QVLP, which was expanding our Foreclosure Conference Project. That initiative was in response to the foreclosure crisis which began during the economic downturn in 2008. For the past thirteen years Kristen has been a vital component to that part of

our organization. She has assisted hundreds of Queens' homeowners facing foreclosure in Queens' Supreme Court and has been successful in helping to save the homes of many of those families.

At the same time that Kristen was providing this essential service she was also becoming involved in the programs of QCBA. Soon she was appointed to the association's Board of Managers and then became an officer a couple of years later. One of her activities was in QCBA's outreach to law schools in the Metro New York area while at the same time performing outreach for Queens homeowners. She conducted a regular outreach session on housing issues at the office of Assemblymember Alicia Hyndman who represents several areas of Queens especially hard hit with foreclosures. Kristen has also been a constant valuable presence at QVLP's CLARO

Consumer Debt Clinic which has been provided every Friday at Queens Civil Court since January 2008, except during Covid court closures. Of course, the disparate impact that Covid had on our low-income minority communities added to the already serious problem of debt delinquencies which CLARO was dealing with.

She managed to handle all those roles while at the same time getting married and the birth of her daughter Giovanna who will be four in July. We applaud the leaders of QCBA who elected her to its presidency, recognizing her years of service to the association and for her dedication to assisting the residents of Queens County.

Mark Weliky is the Executive Director of the Queens Volunteer Lawyers Project, Inc.



Left to Right Mark Weliky and President Kristen Dubowski

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New York State
Bar Association



NEW YORK STATE BAR ASSOCIATION
PRO BONO DEPARTMENT

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Do You Have a Story to Share...

- **Have you worked on or do you know of a special pro bono project?**
- **Has a pro bono case made a difference in the lives of others?**
- **Has an individual attorney or firm gone above and beyond to provide pro bono assistance?**

We invite you to submit articles showcasing excellence in pro bono service for upcoming editions of the Pro Bono Newsletter. For more information, go to www.nysba.org/probono.

