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Pro Bono Week Just the Beginning of Emphasis on Access to Justice

The Alabama State Bar was proud to help celebrate National Pro Bono Week last month, October 25-31. This celebration recognized the valuable work lawyers do throughout the year to represent those who cannot afford civil legal assistance. The event provided a time to reflect on this core value of our profession, celebrate the achievements of pro bono activities and elevate them to even higher levels of service. This was also a time to educate the public about the pro bono services attorneys provide, and to celebrate those providing those services—Alabama lawyers.

Pro bono work is a priority for the Alabama State Bar, and is accomplished through the Volunteer Lawyers Program (VLP). The VLP works to meet the needs of low-income Alabamians with the active participation of our members, who donate their time to ensure the underserved have equal access to justice. Our clients are low-income persons who cannot afford an attorney and who have a wide range of legal problems including consumer, domestic, housing and probate matters.

Participation in the VLP affords us the opportunity to fulfill our professional responsibility to make legal counsel available to indigents consistent with a true sense of professionalism and Rule 6.1 of the *Alabama Rules of Professional Conduct*. Equally important, volunteer attorneys gain excellent client and courtroom experience since they are fully in charge of their pro bono cases. Most important of all, VLP attorneys derive great personal satisfaction from helping the less fortunate and from making a positive, visible difference in their communities.

As part of Pro Bono Week, we set a number of goals designed to help those in need, to promote the Volunteer Lawyer Program to our colleagues in the legal community, to help increase funding for these services and to raise public awareness of pro bono work.

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"One of our main focus areas was awareness and encouragement within the legal community," said **Alyce Spruell**, president-elect of the Alabama State Bar, and chair of our Pro Bono Week task force. "In addition to highlighting and emphasizing the need for pro bono representation among our bar members, we also worked to educate the public about it, with an emphasis on the need for funding these important services. We need a broad base of support—it can't just come from the bar—it has to come from the community at large."

Outreach activities included a partnership with every circuit in the state, and all five law schools to provide pro bono services in their communities. Clinics providing free legal services were scheduled all over the state within the 60-day timeframe surrounding Pro Bono Week.

In addition to participating in hands-on service events, bar members were enlisted to speak to members of the media, as well as to civic clubs and organizations. Additionally, public service announcements about Pro Bono Week ran throughout the state on television and radio. These efforts helped raise the profile of the legal profession by illustrating the good work attorneys do within the community, while helping to educate the public about the varied nature of pro bono work and the many people it serves.

Alabama was the first state in the nation to officially designate Oct. 25-31, 2009 as Pro Bono Week, with a proclamation signed by Gov. Bob Riley. Additionally, Pro Bono Week was declared by mayors throughout the state, and judicial resolutions were passed by the circuit, district and juvenile judges' associations.

If you are not yet involved in the Volunteer Lawyers Program, I urge you to consider it now. YOU can make a difference! It is estimated that about 25 percent of Alabama's population, or approximately 1 million people, live in poverty. With limited staff and

budgets, federally funded Legal Services programs cannot handle all the legal problems of these stricken Alabamians. As a result, many poor persons find themselves waiting without legal representation in matters crucial to their well-being.

Please help us with this critical problem by joining the Volunteer Lawyers Program. If this is impossible for you right now, other options are available to serve low-income Alabamians. You can perform intake and screening at an "advice only" legal clinic or Legal Services office in your area, or serve as a speaker at a VLP-sponsored training seminar, or even recruit for this program at bar association functions. Sign up on the Alabama State Bar Web site (www.alabar.org), call the bar (334-269-1515) or e-mail vlp2@alabar.org to request an enrollment form. If you live in Huntsville, Birmingham or Mobile, you can enroll by calling your local bar. We gratefully accept whatever time you are able to give.

The important mission of Pro Bono Week does not end just because the date of this celebration has passed. It is an ongoing commitment for Alabama lawyers. ▲▲▲

Photo Credits, Annual Meeting Highlights

Thanks to **Laura Calloway, Robert Cook, Wyatt Cook, Bruce Gray, Earl Lawson, Diane Locke, Robby Lusk, Frank McLaughlin, Cameron Murphy,** and **Kari Skinner** for their photographic skills and assistance with the September *Alabama Lawyer!*

Omission

Please note that the article, "State Bar Offers Discounts to Military Personnel," which appeared on page 353 of the September issue, was authored by **Renee Avery, ASB Lawyer Referral Service secretary.**

