



THOMAS J. METHVIN



## "Thank You, Volunteer Lawyers!"

The Volunteer Lawyers Program (VLP) was created to provide free legal services to poor and disadvantaged Alabamians. Through its VLP, the Alabama State Bar (ASB) refers cases to volunteer private attorneys who agree to provide free legal assistance to low-income clients. There are four VLPs affiliated with the Alabama State Bar: those operated by the Birmingham, Mobile and Madison County Bar associations, and the ASB VLP. Currently, approximately 3,000 lawyers statewide participate in the VLP. Since we started our recruiting efforts in January 2009, 550 new attorneys have joined.

Alabama is last in funding for Access to Justice for the poor. Raising funds is even more difficult in today's economy. To ensure that all people receive the legal help they need, we are striving to be *first* in VLP. For every lawyer we add to this program, there are more people helped. We have made great progress so far, but there is a lot left to do.

There are many reasons attorneys choose to participate in the VLP. These may include a sense of obligation, a historical or family connection to pro bono work, a feeling of wanting to give back to the community or even a desire to learn. Participation in the VLP also allows us to fulfill our professional responsibility to make legal counsel available to indigents, consistent with a true sense of professionalism.

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To get a better picture of the reasons lawyers choose to donate their time to VLP service, we talked to some of them. Some of these folks have been lawyers, and a part of the VLP, for more than 20 years. Others are new to the VLP. Why did they join, and what do they get out of being a part of it?

**Franklin Luke Coley, Jr.**, an attorney in Mobile, has been a part of the Mobile VLP for nearly 25 years. He was active in the development of the ASB VLP and the Mobile VLP.

"At the time I started, pro bono service in the state was haphazard. Everyone said they took pro bono cases, but it wasn't really an intentional thing; it was something most lawyers just fell into in the course of their practice," Coley recalls. "The first state VLP committee meeting I went to, the bar had commissioned

a polling firm to study the legal needs of the poor, and whether or not they were being met. When the results were presented, it revealed the abysmally haphazard level of any attempts to make anybody's life better through pro bono. That study was really a call to action to everyone who was in the room at the time. That's kind of how I got my fire lit."

Coley says one of his favorite experiences with pro bono work involved working with a young lawyer—who went on to become a circuit judge—who was assigned a pro bono case that he wasn't sure how to handle. Coley provided assistance and enjoyed watching the lawyer's confidence develop as he learned the ropes of that case. "I see that as multiplying our program's services. Now, not only do I have my knowledge and experience, but that person has gained experience," he says.

## Quality Paralegal Education



### ■ Our Mission

The Faulkner University Legal Studies Department seeks to provide a program that supports its students during their academic and professional careers. Upon graduation, students will be well equipped to begin or continue an exciting career as a paralegal.

### ■ What are typical paralegal responsibilities?

Paralegals work in many areas of law including litigation, real estate, corporate, probate and estate planning, intellectual property, family law, labor law, and bankruptcy. Paralegals perform tasks such as investigating facts, drafting legal documents, legal research, interviewing clients and witnesses, maintaining contact with clients, and the maintenance of legal files.

### ■ What can I not do as a paralegal?

A paralegal/legal assistant cannot give legal advice, represent a client in court, establish a fee, or accept a case on behalf of an attorney.

### ■ How do I choose a Legal Studies Program?

One way to ensure you receive a quality education is to choose a program with instruction specific to the skills required for the state. Secondly, it is important to choose a program with academic standards, such as those required by the American Bar Association.

Faulkner University's Legal Studies Program is approved by the American Bar Association. The Faulkner University Legal Studies program offers an ABA Approved curriculum exclusively at its Montgomery campus, with a strong reputation of academic excellence.

### ■ How can I get started?

Legal Study courses are offered at convenient times that cater to the needs of students of all ages. Our faculty is comprised of experienced practitioners with outstanding academic credentials. Contact Marci Johns, J.D., Director of Legal Studies today!

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**VOLUNTEER LAWYER PROGRAM**  
**Participation by Judicial Circuit**

<b>Circuit</b>	<b>Regular Members in Circuit</b>	<b>Special Members in Circuit</b>	<b>VLP Members in Circuit</b>	<b>Percentage Regular Members</b>	<b>Percentage Total Members</b>
1 Choctaw, Clarke, Washington	54	11	19	35%	29%
2 Butler, Crenshaw, Lowdes	44	12	12	27%	21%
3 Barbour, Bullock	44	7	18	41%	35%
4 Bibb, Dallas, Hale, Perry, Wilcox	93	28	24	26%	20%
5 Chambers, Macon, Randolph, Tallapoosa	108	23	29	27%	22%
6 Tuscaloosa	447	109	148	33%	27%
7 Calhoun, Cleburn	159	43	37	23%	18%
8 Morgan	134	37	62	46%	36%
9 Cherokee, DeKalb	57	12	15	26%	22%
10 Jefferson	4536	603	740	16%	14%
11 Lauderdale	158	22	36	23%	20%
12 Coffee, Pike	96	16	14	15%	13%
13 Mobile	1094	209	675	62%	52%
14 Walker	116	23	20	17%	14%
15 Montgomery	1054	602	264	25%	16%
16 Etowah	136	27	34	25%	21%
17 Greene, Marengo, Sumter	38	8	14	37%	30%
18 Shelby	403	115	26	6%	5%
19 Autauga, Chilton, Elmore	149	54	26	17%	13%
20 Henry, Houston	216	32	71	33%	29%
21 Escambia	43	9	8	19%	15%
22 Covington	60	8	8	13%	12%
23 Madison	680	132	175	26%	22%
24 Fayette, Lamar, Pickens	27	16	7	26%	16%
25 Marion, Winston	52	10	22	42%	35%
26 Russell	53	11	8	15%	13%
27 Marshall	98	15	31	32%	27%
28 Baldwin	330	68	44	13%	11%
29 Talladega	79	14	13	16%	14%
30 St. Clair	76	17	13	17%	14%
31 Colbert	68	8	15	22%	20%
32 Cullman	75	13	12	16%	14%
33 Dale, Geneva	50	17	22	44%	33%
34 Franklin	14	7	1	7%	5%
35 Conecuh, Monroe	31	8	11	35%	28%
36 Lawrence	21	8	7	33%	24%
37 Lee	179	30	56	31%	27%
38 Jackson	34	12	10	29%	22%
39 Limestone	43	14	14	33%	25%
40 Clay, Coosa	14	7	1	7%	5%
41 Blount	33	8	7	21%	17%

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**Gabrielle N. Helix**, an attorney in private practice in Huntsville, has been a lawyer for “about two years and 30 days . . . not that I’m counting!” She became a lawyer as a second career, after many successful years as a television journalist. She estimates she’s been doing pro bono work from “about day one.” Her first case was pro bono, on behalf of a young woman who had visited four other lawyers but couldn’t afford to pay for legal services.

“I had just started practicing,” Helix recalls. “Nobody would take her case because she didn’t have money. I had no experience and I told her this. It was my first case and we had a great outcome.”

Helix now handles a lot of pro bono cases, both independently and through the Madison County VLP. She says she’s grateful to be able to do so much volunteer lawyer work. One of her most recent cases involved an adoption, where great-grandparents adopted a child whose mother and father had drug problems. Although they don’t have much money, the child is now in a home full of love.

“I think the court should be open to anyone. I don’t think you should be stopped from adopting a child, or stopped from getting a divorce from an abusive spouse, because you just don’t have any money,” Helix said. “I think people should have access to legal resources, rights or remedies even if they don’t have money. I think when you volunteer, you get back in touch with what this profession was really designed to do.”

**Tim Gallagher**, with Sasser, Sefton, Tipton & Davis PC in Montgomery, says, “They aren’t going to give you something you’re not comfortable with.” A lawyer since 2007, he only recently became a part of the Volunteer Lawyers Program in Montgomery. Since joining, he regularly donates his time to the Montgomery County Bar Association’s new monthly

free legal services clinics, and plans to continue in that program as well as taking referrals from the VLP. “If you don’t feel comfortable, you can ask for something different, or ask for help. I think if attorneys realize that, they’ll be more likely to sign up. Also, if you’re part of a firm where there are more experienced attorneys, I’ve found they are almost always willing to help out and give you some guidance.

“I personally find it interesting to learn an area of law, to branch out,” Gallagher says. “You might find out it’s something you end up being interested in, and can grow your practice. If you’re a little adventurous and want to expand your horizons, it’s a great opportunity to do that.”

The VLP addresses a variety of concerns or objections a lawyer might have:

- **“It takes too much time.”** Actually, lawyers spend about five hours, on average, per case they accept through the VLP.
- **“I might get sued.”** Each VLP provides malpractice coverage for cases accepted through its programs.
- **“I don’t understand the area of law for the case I’m assigned.”** The VLP provides mentors who can help guide you through a case, or you can simply decline the case.
- **“I’m just not a joiner.”** We aren’t really asking you to “join” something, but to make a commitment to fulfill one of the core values of our profession—service to the public.

I challenge you to go beyond obligation and find out what volunteer lawyer service can mean to you. If you are not already a member of the VLP, please join. For more information, or to join the VLP online, go to [www.alabar.org](http://www.alabar.org). 