

Widener University Delaware Law School

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Extending Courthouse 'Keys' to Those in Need

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When the American Bar Association decided to inaugurate its National Pro Bono Week celebration five years ago, the country was already in economic turmoil.



DELAWARE VOICE
LINDA L. AMMONS

Designed to call attention to the significant need for pro bono services in the United States, it shines a spotlight on the trove of opportunities attorneys have to use their skills and schooling to help others who require legal assistance.

Widener Law applauds the ABA and its Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service for bringing this worthy cause to national consciousness over the week of Oct. 20. There is no better investment of an attorney's talents than those which are used to assist a person with unmet legal needs and a lack of financial re-

sources. And there are many in need. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, 11 percent of the First State population lives at or below the federal poverty level. In too many cases, dire straits are the result of unmet legal needs, such as veterans whose disability benefits were unlawfully denied by the government and who therefore struggle to pay for housing, food and utilities.

The Legal Help Link, a toll-free Delaware phone line that rings into the Widener Law campus and is answered by law students and staff, and Delaware Volunteer Legal Services employees, logs more than 30,000 calls a year from people seeking pro bono assistance. In a state as small as Delaware, that is significant.

Our Delaware Civil Clinic, staffed by Widener Law students under the supervision of Professor Dana Harrington Conner and attorney Catherine Zwolak Kilian, licensed members of the Delaware Bar, contributes more than 5,000 hours a year to clients who are largely domestic violence victims

with protection from abuse, child custody and visitation matters. Through this clinic 306 people received either direct representation or advice and referral in the previous academic year.

The demand for services is evident each Friday at the Protection From Abuse Pro Bono Program inside the New Castle County Courthouse. Clients in desperate circumstances – for whom these orders can be actual lifesaving measures – are assisted by Widener students. But domestic violence survivors have a critical need that is not being met: child custody matters. Although students provide representation in this area, the number of individuals seeking help far outweighs current resources.

When Delaware Supreme Court Justice Randy J. Holland administers the oath for the limited practice of law to students from multiple Widener clinics, and to some who hold externships, he faithfully tells them what a pivotal role they'll play in their clients' lives. "You hold the keys to the court-

house," he says, explaining that but for their service, their clients could largely be on their own.

These are powerful words, particularly for law students getting their first taste of the immense impact their advocacy can have on a client's quality of life. For example, Widener's Veterans Law Clinic has recovered more than \$5.2 million in unpaid medical disability benefits for servicemen and women, who were wrongly denied what was owed to them for their patriotic sacrifices. Our Wills For Heroes program volunteers have helped nearly 500 Delaware first responders obtain vital end-of-life planning documents.

The numbers are impressive, but the real rewards cannot be fully quantified.

I congratulate the ABA for encouraging attorneys to do more. Widener Law has built a culture of civic engagement where tomorrow's legal professionals are learning by serving their communities. In the process, our students get to experience those immeasurable re-

wards, starting with the satisfaction that comes from using their educations to help improve people's lives.

As I have told each Widener Law graduating class since I became dean eight years ago, "To those whom much is given, much is required." That saying speaks not only to my own values, but captures the aspirations of the ABA, which asks attorneys to aspire to 50 hours of pro bono service each year. Those who want to get more involved can inquire with Delaware Volunteer Legal Services, the pro bono arm of the Delaware Supreme Court that has a free home on Widener Law's campus.

National Pro Bono Week is a fitting time to take stock of the need for legal services and the calling of lawyers. In a state whose identity is so interwoven with the courts, I encourage members of the legal profession to share their keys to the courthouse and make justice available for all.

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