

According to the Hon. Lewis Powell, Jr., former Supreme Court Associate Justice, “Equal justice under the law is not merely a caption on the Supreme Court building. It is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of the ends for which our legal system exists.” Equal access to justice is the fundamental principle on which our judicial system is based – treating all individuals who come before it equally under the law regardless of their gender, class, religion, age, or other category. It is designed to provide legal representation to indigent defendants and prisoners as well as those hapless souls denied fair and equitable treatment in our legal system.

Thomas Jefferson set the stage for equal access to justice in his first inaugural address in 1801 by referring to “equal and exact justice for all” as essential to our government’s principles. For criminal cases, we have in place the Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution regarding free legal representation of federal and state criminal defendants, along with the Public Defender’s Office. In civil cases, we have The Legal Aid Society and many non-profit organizations, along with the creation of the **Equal Access to Justice Act of 1948 (EAJA)**, as amended (codified as 28 U.S.C.A §2412). Subsequent to this, many initiatives have been implemented in an attempt to rectify the injustices of our legal system.

I have mixed emotions regarding whether or not I believe enough is being done to assist individuals who are in need of Pro Bono services. I segued from the financial services industry into the legal profession motivated by the thought of making a difference in the lives of others. Indeed, there are wonderful programs in place across our country through various government agencies and non-profit organizations with a strong commitment to providing aid to impoverished citizens. And, the city of Philadelphia can boast of a wide variety of initiatives available to legal professionals regarding Pro Bono work. I had the fortunate opportunity as a student to do a volunteer internship at Philadelphia VIP (Volunteer for the Indigent Program),

which was established in 1981 and is the hub of all Pro Bono work in this legally vibrant city.

Philly VIP provides legal services to low income residents whose civil legal problems threaten to unravel their everyday existence. These individuals can't afford their own counsel and their cases are unable to be handled by other public interest groups. Just in Philadelphia alone, the indigent client base has significantly increased because of the current financial, health care and home foreclosure crises.

The Philly VIP staff has been actively involved in Mortgage Foreclosure Conferences, a joint initiative with the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia to facilitate mandatory mediation requirements between lenders and borrowers before a home can be sold through foreclosure. As a student intern, I assisted the attorneys with client intake and also scheduled volunteer attorneys to represent clients; I was responsible for making sure there were enough Pro Bono attorneys to represent all clients in need. While many attorneys and paralegals were happy to volunteer their services, some have been confronted with the pressure of the current economic downturn, a dilemma unto itself in that these particular legal professionals must choose between holding onto a job (or looking for a new job) and wanting to dedicate time to Pro Bono work.

The Philadelphia Association of Paralegals (PAP) is another organization that emphasizes Pro Bono work. As an active member of the Pro Bono committee, I'm proud to say we honor our paralegals for outstanding Pro Bono service and foster working relationships with many of the non-profit organizations throughout Philadelphia. Many members actively participate in an incentive program called **100 Paralegals + 100 Hours = 100% Difference**. The goal of this initiative is to have at least 25% of PAP's membership (about 100 paralegals) perform and report a mere one (1) hour of Pro Bono service in 2009. Such incentive programs have most definitely increased the level of Pro Bono work taken on by legal professionals. However, I do not believe

enough is being done, because we have so many individuals who have yet to receive the proper assistance they deserve. A large segment of our population is in need of legal services, but these individuals cannot afford an attorney on their own; failing to provide legal services to them will only submerge their legal matters deeper within the entanglement of “red tape” if not resolved in a timely manner. Society as a whole persuades itself that all is being done to keep legal non-profits solvent and functional, but I strongly believe we must always strive to increase donations, grants and financial aid for those entities carrying the major burden of Pro Bono work in this country. If not, the potential “domino effect” from our complacency more than likely will result in a surge of poverty and violent crimes.

As a paralegal student, I plan to continue with my Pro Bono efforts because I am fully committed to equal access to justice and will do so long after I have graduated from my certificate program. My next Pro Bono project will be with the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia (PILCOP), where I will be trained to help attorneys represent parents of students with disabilities. I constantly encourage my fellow students to provide Pro Bono services and make a long-term volunteer commitment; it is one of the many facets within a legal career which can lead to professional satisfaction. Those entering the legal profession must be committed to equal access to justice regardless of their career path. As students, we have many legal issues and challenges available to us for meaningful Pro Bono involvement – but it is critical to choose one you feel allows you to have a strong impact on others. The choices available regarding Pro Bono opportunities are almost overwhelming: immigration, landlord/tenant disputes, domestic violence, family law, juvenile cases, employment, elder law, consumer law issues, education, housing, and health care.

Equal access to justice is the fundamental reason why paralegals perform Pro Bono work; helping individuals with limited access to legal services truly makes a difference in their lives. Many non-profit organizations desperately need students to help with filing, answering the phone, case load management and assisting managing attorneys overburdened by an abundance of tasks. When such responsibilities are covered through Pro Bono help, attorneys are freed up to represent clients and help more individuals in need. With the current downward shift in our economy, these legal non-profits remain challenged in their attempts to obtain funding so that more professionals can be hired; Pro Bono services are desperately needed to mitigate the staffing gap. Regardless, all Pro Bono work plays an important role in contributing to someone's well being. The people we help are the elderly, disabled, undereducated, impoverished, learning disabled, unemployed or mentally ill, who without our services face tremendous difficulties in securing legal representation.

In this time of rising unemployment, when many people of diverse economic and educational levels are experiencing financial hardship, it is imperative for all veteran and aspiring legal professionals to accept the notion of equal access to justice not as an ideal concept, but as a humane, unconditional responsibility within the legal vocation. I have a long history of intertwining my professional career with my passion for "hands on" community service work, and the vast Pro Bono opportunities available to help those less fortunate than myself are intrinsic to my motivation for pursuing a paralegal certificate. I believe Sir Winston Churchill captured the essence of equal access to justice when he said, "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give." As a future paralegal, I aspire to continue to uphold this philosophy, and I ambitiously hope to influence my peers in the paralegal profession to adopt this principle as their own.