

Pro Bono Pivots: Redesigning Pro Bono Programs for a Virtual World

In March 2020, the legal community had to adapt as the Covid-19 pandemic caused offices to close and courthouses became virtual. As legal aid organizations swiftly adapted to meet evolving community needs, they also had to pivot their pro bono programs to create new opportunities to serve their clients while engaging their volunteers in a virtual environment. Remote help desks, virtual clinics, and legal chatbots replaced many of the traditional service delivery models. The three legal aid organizations highlighted below reflect on some of the pro bono pivots they made during the pandemic to keep their programs going strong:

Center for Disability and Elder Law (CDEL)

CDEL faced a rather unique set of challenges for legal organizations: a very large portion of the populations that it serves is not comfortable with remote options and lacks reliable access to basic technology or internet. For years, CDEL's programs were mostly delivered in-person in the community and at the courthouse. Undeterred, CDEL continued to live up to its mission of providing legal assistance to seniors and adults with disabilities.

CDEL quickly pivoted to offer its services remotely in conjunction with its large network of community and pro bono partners. While CDEL previously offered most of its services in the neighborhoods where its clients lived, the pandemic forced it to change the model to a virtual setting by using phone and video conferencing. CDEL has worked patiently to educate its populations on technology and has sought alternate sources of technology that are more accessible for its clients. Through all the transitions, its community and pro bono partnerships remained central to its programming and service delivery model.

For example, last summer CDEL teamed up with a senior building whose residents speak four different languages. CDEL used interpreters to hold a Power of Attorney workshop for multilingual clients after a training session for pro bono



volunteers. CDEL then returned for a signing event to execute the previously drafted documents. Maiko Yanai, the resident services coordinator, was impressed with CDEL's resolve in helping the seniors and remarked that the documents helped to "empower" her residents and made them feel more secure.

CDEL also had to adapt its court-based guardianship help desk to meet community needs as court proceedings and services moved to a virtual format. Formerly housed in the Daley Center as a walk-in advice desk, the guardianship desk was reimagined in a virtual format. With pro bono help from Chapman and Cutler LLP, CDEL was able to automate its suite of documents to better serve the public in a virtual environment. Now, CDEL attorneys and volunteers provide all the needed documents along with step-by-step electronic filing and court hearing instructions. One client described the process as "fantastic" and "seamless" and was able to successfully complete the guardianship for his daughter through CDEL's new virtual help desk format.

CDEL, along with so many other legal aid and pro bono organizations, worked tirelessly and creatively to keep meeting the needs of clients and to provide a positive and rewarding experience for its pro bono

partners. As Patrick Bushell, a volunteer and CDEL Young Professional Board Member, put it: "CDEL has really stepped up to the plate in modifying its procedures to ensure that the work hasn't stopped despite this difficult time for everyone."

– Cheryl Lipton, *the Center for Disability & Elder Law*

Lawyers for the Creative Arts (LCA)

The arts in Chicago span a huge variety of activities, genres, and neighborhoods. From storefront theaters to music festivals, from small art galleries to the recent Monet exhibition, Chicagoans embrace the arts as communal activities. Last March, Covid-19 supplanted creativity with economic ruin when communal arts gatherings became threats to everyone's health.

Artists largely operate in the gig economy, and Covid hit them especially hard, throwing 62% of working artists into an unemployment system with few benefits. A *New York Times* article on the subject focused on the plight of Chicago violinist Jennifer Koh, who abruptly went from a burgeoning international concert career to being forced to subsist on food stamps. The severity of the situation prompted some cultural leaders to consider triage as a model for plans to save the arts.

Lawyers for the Creative Arts adopted

a different approach, exploring new ways to help whoever asked for it. LCA jumped into action early in the pandemic, creating a hotline that gave hundreds of struggling artists and arts managers speedy access to free legal help to discuss urgent issues like eviction, performance cancellations and unemployment, and working in partnership with other area legal aid organizations. LCA also created new educational programs on the legal problems facing artists and arts organizations and simultaneously expanded its capacity to deliver pro bono legal assistance on subjects well outside of the traditional concentration on Arts Law.

One of the early challenges was to develop in-house capabilities to help those seeking benefits under new federal Covid relief statutes. Fortunately, in addition to our customary client base of individual artists and small to mid-sized arts organizations, some of the city's largest cultural institutions as well as state and local governmental entities took advantage of the educational programs, one-on-one assistance, and online facilities. LCA assisted 30 Illinois arts venues and one municipality with Shuttered Venue Operators Grants applications, and they cumulatively received \$17 million in SVOG funds.

Amidst all the turmoil and crisis came a plea for normalcy from the Director of the Chicago Film Office, Kwame Amoaku. With filmmaking shut down due to the pandemic, he asked LCA to help keep Chicago filmmakers engaged by running a program on legal issues in independent filmmaking. The organization rose to the challenge and created a five-part series, "The Keys to Film Law," that featured 26 attorneys and industry professionals.

The success of that program showed the resilience of Chicago's arts community; they weren't giving up but were instead preparing for the day when the arts would be back.

The pandemic's devastating impact on the arts is far from over. LCA's important pandemic response work continues even now, and there will be new challenges to come. But LCA also knows that the legal community will continue doing its part to help the arts community get back on its feet.

– Jan Feldman, *Lawyers for the Creative Arts*

Pro Bono Network (PBN)

PBN volunteer attorney Renu Thamman had her own Covid-related challenges at home and work, but she was reasonably confident she would be okay. She was more concerned about people in abusive relationships who were sheltering in place: "It breaks my heart thinking about what they are going through while I am safe in my house."

When the pandemic hit, PBN had to confront the same question faced by legal aid organizations everywhere: How could they continue engaging volunteer attorneys and serving clients in need of no-cost legal assistance?

Seemingly simple questions don't always have simple answers. Although the courts shut down, the legal needs didn't disappear. In fact, for far too many residents, the pandemic exacerbated existing legal problems and created entirely new ones. PBN knew they would have to make rapid adjustments so their volunteer attorneys could continue to assist with wills, criminal

records expungement, eviction and tenant advocacy, immigration, orders of protection and divorce, guardianship, and Social Security. They also knew that the stakes for their clients were high, and they would have to meet the moment with the same creativity and dedication that undergirded the organization's founding 10 years ago.

PBN hardly skipped a beat. They quickly figured out how to continue recruiting and training volunteer attorneys, continue providing services, and do it all safely in an environment of unsurpassed uncertainty. PBN's unique pro bono model was designed from the beginning to support attorneys outside of a traditional legal or pro bono environment. To that end, the organization has long offered training, support, and flexibility for volunteers in a way that supported individuals who otherwise would have been unlikely candidates for pro bono work. PBN's history of looking for creative ways to remove barriers to attorney volunteerism, helped them in their work to overcome pandemic-related obstacles so volunteers could continue providing legal services to people who need them.

For example, PBN's volunteer recruitment and training boot camps were moved online, along with virtual how-to clinics for new and returning volunteers. PBN, with its legal aid partners, moved its senior clinics from in-person to phone meetings while maintaining the same number of clients served. The U visa immigration project also moved to a virtual format, which was supplemented with masked outdoor meetings to secure client signatures on final filing documents.

Donna Blatchford, who was glad for the opportunity to volunteer during the pandemic, worked with our virtual senior clinics, and said, "In these uncertain times, when human connection is limited, PBN gave me a way to use my legal skills and make a real difference. My client was so happy that her end-of-life plans were being implemented, and I am so happy to have been able to help." As the world turned upside down, PBN and its legal aid partners provided their volunteers a place where they could help rise to the challenge and the need of the moment.

– Laura Brookes & Heena Musabji, *Pro Bono Network* ■

