

Create Connection by Returning to Community Volunteerism

By Caroline Manley



“It’s not what you can do, it’s what you are willing to do.”

These words were recently shared with me by the Center for Disability and Elder Law’s (CDEL) Governing Board Member Ryan Whitacre. They ring true for many life circumstances, including pro bono volunteerism.

As we prepare to celebrate Pro Bono Week in October, I’m reminded about how willing the legal profession is to help. We are a unique group in that a law degree comes with the expectation of service. We are called to use our knowledge and expertise to assist others.

Over the past two years many pro bono opportunities moved to remote settings. Legal aid organizations and the private bar did an incredible job to innovate and problem solve how to transition services virtually. We collectively made strides in technology and service delivery and will continue to be well equipped to serve clients who require or desire remote settings.

However, it was not quite the same.

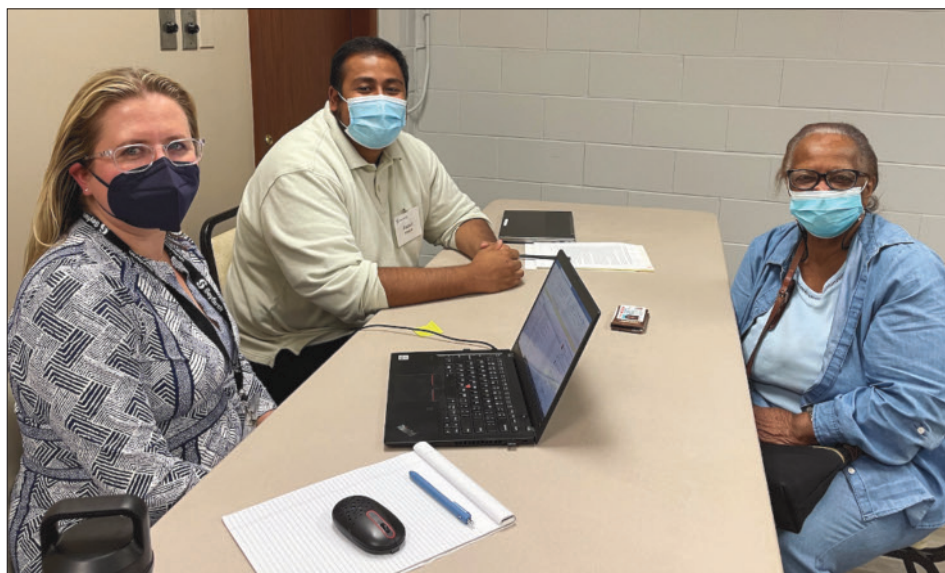
For CDEL, our programs are rooted in the model that we bring our services to the communities where our clients reside. Our clients’ legal matters are often related to their lived experiences and being present in their communities provides a depth to their representation that cannot be replicated virtually. That’s why

I was thrilled when CDEL started moving back into the community in early 2022. Our volunteers have now joined us as we staff monthly clinics throughout Cook County and provide legal workshops covering topics such as homeownership and end of life planning in conjunction with our wonderful community partners.

We are grateful for the dozens of volunteers who have answered our call to return onsite. Although we initially thought getting clients to return for in-person workshops would be slow, that has

not been the case. In the first half of the year, over 230 clients attended a clinic or workshop in their neighborhoods. CDEL could not serve this volume of case files without our dedicated volunteers.

For example, this June attorneys and summer associates from Kirkland & Ellis LLP joined CDEL at the Woodson Library on 95th Street to participate in CDEL’s Housing Preservation Project. These volunteers met with 10 senior homeowners identified through the Chicago Bungalow Association. Services



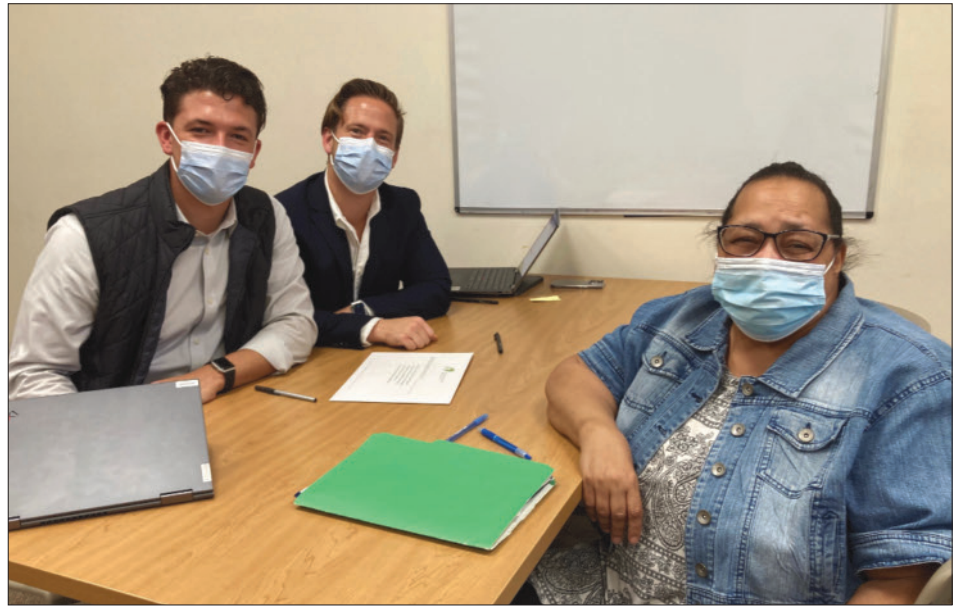
Seyfarth Shaw LLP Partner Whitney Schmidt and Summer Associate Razaul Haque assist a CDEL client with preparing her power of attorney documents at a workshop in Roseland.

provided included title checkups, property tax exemptions, and Transfer on Death Instruments for residential real estate.

Pro Bono Counsel Ashley Huebner reflected, “After the past two years of doing so much remote work, it was fantastic to see people face to face in the community. At the onsite workshop, many of our teams connected with clients and had substantive conversations unrelated to the legal work. It was great to not be doing the legal work in a vacuum.”

Getting back out into the community can be challenging after so many years at home. For Seyfarth Shaw LLP, volunteering at a power of attorney workshop in Roseland was a chance for the team to connect. Seyfarth Pro Bono & Philanthropy Partner Ashley Cano explained, “We rented a bus so we could travel to the clinic as a group. It’s easier for our team to travel to the clients than for them to travel to us.” A group of 18 volunteers helped over a dozen seniors with their power of attorney documents. In addition to providing important legal documents and peace of mind, Ashley and the Seyfarth team enjoyed “getting to make a connection with the clients and learn their backstories.”

Personally, I felt elated when I returned to CDEL’s monthly Community Clinic at the Ezra Multi-Service Center



At a CDEL Housing Preservation Program Workshop in June Kirkland & Ellis LLP attorneys William Ballentine and Nathan Howe assisted a CDEL client with reviewing the title status of her home and a Transfer on Death Instrument (TODI).

in Uptown this March. I had not been inside for over two years and was thrilled to see the familiar faces of the staff members who have welcomed CDEL’s clients for so many prior years. While so much has changed, the desire for human connection has stayed the same.

This Pro Bono Week, I encourage all legal professionals to recognize everything that they can do. I challenge you to decide what you are willing to do. Legal aid agencies throughout

Chicagoland have pro bono opportunities to fit every interest and available time commitment. Learn something new, visit a new community, and experience the joy that comes with serving others.



Caroline Manley is the Executive Director at the Center for Disability & Elder Law.

The Center for Disability & Elder Law (CDEL) provides free civil legal services to seniors and people with disabilities throughout Chicagoland. Because CDEL’s mission includes fostering pro bono service, the organization incorporates volunteerism into all of its programming. To learn more, visit CDEL’s website at cdelaw.org/volunteer.

CDEL has several opportunities to volunteer to help people in communities throughout the Chicago area. To learn how to volunteer, visit CDEL’s website at www.cdelaw.org/volunteer

The CBA also has community-based pro bono and volunteer opportunities throughout the year, including the Lawyers in the Classroom program. Teachers and attorneys partner to provide multiple authentic interactive learning opportunities that allow students to enhance critical thinking, collaboration, and civil discourse skills. To learn more, contact Tiffani Watson, M.Ed. at twatson@chicagobar.org or (312) 554-2060.

To learn more about other community based pro bono opportunities in the Chicago area, browse the CBF’s Online Pro Bono Opportunity Guide to search over 100 pro bono opportunities to find the one that’s right for you. The CBF is your pro bono resource if you have other questions about pro bono or getting involved. You can contact Elise Tinchler, Associate Director of Programs & Advocacy at (312) 554-1207 or etincher@chicagobarfoundation.org.