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## For law firms, pro bono work is all about relationships

By: [Anamika Roy](#) Daily Record Legal Affairs Writer April 29, 2018

For many private attorneys, making time for pro bono work can be a challenge for a variety of reasons, from being too busy to not having the training or resources to take on the extra caseload.

Attorneys get into the profession because they want to help others, but sometimes "they don't know how to take the first step," said Lisa R. Dewey, pro bono partner at DLA Piper US LLP. That's where partnerships between law firms and legal service providers come in.

At a panel hosted by the Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland on building relationships between legal services organizations and law firms, private attorneys involved in pro bono work talked about how those spheres of the legal community can work together.

The panelists at the Maryland Partners for Justice Conference in downtown Baltimore on Thursday came from a range of firms with varying resources dedicated to pro bono work. DLA Piper's nonprofit arm, New Perimeter, for example, offers pro bono legal services around the world.

"The firm has always had a strong commitment to pro bono," said Dewey, who is also the director of New Perimeter. "It has been part of our culture since the beginning."

Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP has a pro bono committee with three members in Baltimore dedicated to connecting attorneys to clients through legal service organizations based on their interests and practice areas, said Robin D. Leone, who is a member of the firm's pro bono committee.

The committee's goal is to get 100 percent participation in the Baltimore office at 10 hours per attorney, Leone said.

Working in the community can also help attorneys learn more about their own practice or turn it into a "passion," she said.

For attorneys in more rural areas, pro bono work can be more personal, because more often than not, attorneys are helping people they see in the grocery store, or their children attend the same schools, said Terri Ann Lowery of Trozzo, Lowery & Weston LLC in Cumberland.

"A motivator (to do pro bono work) in a small town isn't difficult," Lowery said.

A recent report on pro bono participation from the Maryland Judiciary bears that out. On the Eastern Shore, 71 percent of full-time lawyers reported some pro bono hours. In Western Maryland, 66 percent reported doing pro bono work.

That same report found only 20 percent of Maryland attorneys give 50 hours or more of pro bono service a year, however. Panelists said lack of time, balancing billable hour requirements and limited resources often serve as barriers to doing pro bono work.

DLA Piper, to that end, allows its attorneys to dedicate some of their billable hours to pro bono work to alleviate that burden.

**'Do your homework'**

Eleanor Hunt, senior counsel at Joseph, Greenwald & Laake P.A. in Greenbelt, said most of the pro bono work she does is "self-initiated," as her firm doesn't have a formal pro bono program like some of the larger shops. Most of her pro bono work comes from referrals from people in public interest organizations with whom she has a personal relationship.

"Relationships do matter," Hunt said.

That sentiment was shared by the rest of the panel. When Leone tries to get attorneys at Saul Ewing to do pro bono, she wants to make sure they have a positive experience by not having pro bono cases that turn out to be more complex than was originally proposed. Leone advised attorneys from public interest organizations in attendance to have a solid client intake policy to ensure attorneys are not turned off from doing future pro bono work.

"Be careful to do your homework," she said.

Attorneys are also more likely to do pro bono work if they are offered training beforehand, panelists said. This may also work in an arrangement where a legal services organization provides training in exchange for a certain number of pro bono hours.

Pro bono work isn't just a one-way street; it can also be a professional development tool for attorneys and help younger attorneys get courtroom experience that they may not otherwise get early on, Dewey said.

"It's a relationship," Hunt said. "It's a give-and-take, we can help each other."