

the pro bono effect

By Erica J. Dominitz



Ronald Flemings

For Pro Bono Work, Finding Right Fit Is Key

Meaningful and Enjoyable Work

Lawyers in the District have many opportunities to get involved in activities outside of their regular practice, but the goal is to find pro bono work that is really meaningful and to enjoy the work that you are doing, not just to check the proverbial box. While I have volunteered my time with a number of different organizations over the years, my work with the CED Project has been a truly exceptional experience. When I first volunteered with the Project in 2010, I was immediately impressed by its mission of supporting nonprofits and small businesses that serve low-income communities. I also thoroughly enjoyed working with the staff, who are so dedicated, hardworking, and inspirational, and who provide top-notch guidance to the lawyers who partner with them.

My experience volunteering with Pennsylvania Avenue Village East was similarly rewarding. The nonprofit's executive director was a pleasure to work with, and it was gratifying to assist an organization that otherwise would not have been able to afford legal services. With my colleague Greg Jacobs, a senior associate and insurance guru in my practice group, I helped the organization review one of its indemnification agreements and its general liability insurance policy, and recommended potential enhancements to its existing coverage.

Risk management is often overlooked by nonprofits in their early stages, but it is one of the essential building blocks for a strong organization. It felt great to know we were supporting a small but important group that provides such vital services to vulnerable D.C. residents.

Strengthening the Safety Net

Started in 1998, the CED Project aims to provide legal assistance to nonprofits and small business entrepreneurs serving low-income communities or the economically disadvantaged. Now one of the leading programs of its kind nationally, the CED Project provides pro bono opportunities for corporate, transactional, and business lawyers by matching them with community-based nonprofits in areas such as

employment law, real estate, corporate governance, contract review, intellectual property, and exempt organizations. The Project also conducts training sessions in partnership with other nonprofits and government agencies, and supports small businesses serving low-income communities by offering free monthly legal clinics, training events, and other resources through its Small Business Initiative.

By ensuring that D.C. nonprofits and small businesses have the support they need to thrive, the CED Project plays an important role in helping D.C. residents living in poverty as well as in promoting community economic development. To date, the Project has matched 515 nonprofit organizations with pro bono counsel for ongoing legal representation and assisted 1,759 small business owners through the Small Business Initiative.

Since my initial volunteer assignment with the CED Project in 2010, I have become even more involved. In 2011 I joined the Project's advisory committee, and assumed the position of committee chair in 2014. Throughout my involvement with the Project, I have been impressed by how it constantly finds innovative ways to address the unmet needs in the nonprofit and small business community.

One new program in 2014, for example, was the Nonprofit Boot Camp for incoming board members. Recognizing that many nonprofits lack the resources to educate board members about their duties and responsibilities, the CED Project and the Center for Nonprofit Advancement jointly organized an intensive one-day course for new members of nonprofit boards and existing board members who wished to enhance their skills as directors. Among the subjects addressed were governance, financial oversight, CEO compensation and evaluation, risk assessment and insurance, and planning for the future. I presented the session on risk management and insurance, while my colleagues Eric Kracov and Steve Donahoe led sessions on executive compensation and board fiduciary duties.

I was impressed by the energy and enthusiasm of the 40 attendees, all of

As a partner on the Insurance Recovery team at Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP who represents corporate insurance policyholders, my typical day involves advising clients and negotiating with and litigating against insurance companies with disputes regarding coverage. However, I recently had the opportunity to work with a different type of client: a small nonprofit that assists the homebound elderly in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the District of Columbia.

Pennsylvania Avenue Village East is a community-based charity that relies on volunteers to provide services to elderly residents in several neighborhoods in Southeast D.C., from transportation to appointments to grocery shopping and prescription pickup. The nonprofit had contacted the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Program's Community Economic Development (CED) Project, seeking a pro bono attorney to advise on the risks its work presented and identifying appropriate risk management tools.

Because I and other members of my practice group had previously participated in a Webinar series on risk management and insurance issues, CED Project Director Regina Hopkins thought my background would be a good fit for the organization and asked if I could provide some assistance. I gladly accepted, and within a few days had my first meeting with the organization's executive director.

whom showed up early on a Saturday and spent the next seven hours listening attentively, asking great questions, and engaging in lively discussions. The sold-out event—and its lengthy waiting list—illustrated the critical need for programs provided by the CED Project. The Project plans to offer more Nonprofit Boot Camp trainings in 2015.

Opportunities to Help and Learn

I strongly believe in the importance of helping those in need through pro bono work and otherwise. I spent the first few years of my career at a small firm, primarily representing employees in employment discrimination cases and unions in connection with labor disputes. Working on those cases reaffirmed my commitment to helping those with compelling and substantial legal needs, but who have few or no resources to pay for lawyers.

Over the years I have taken advantage of opportunities to participate in a range of pro bono projects, including representing nonprofits and individuals in insurance disputes, advising nonprofits on insurance policy renewals, and presenting training sessions geared toward nonprofits. My pro bono work enriches me, both personally and professionally. When I take a pro bono

matter, I may be working on issues similar to what I do in my regular practice, but the considerations can be quite different depending on the size and focus of the organization. There's always plenty to learn.

Now, as a member of the Pro Bono Committee at Kilpatrick Townsend, I endeavor to help my colleagues find interesting and meaningful pro bono opportunities. More than a few of them, like me, have had extremely rewarding experiences volunteering with the the CED Project. A number have volunteered at policy clinics (during which volunteers first receive substantive training on a particular topic, and then meet directly with clients to provide advice on that topic) and at small business clinics. Others have presented at various training programs, and some directly represent nonprofits on issues ranging from corporate governance to business disputes.

The CED Project offers attorneys many different ways to help, whether you want to represent a client, write a legal alert, or give a presentation. It's exciting for junior attorneys because they can take advantage of hands-on opportunities to advise clients and manage matters (with partner supervision, of course) at an early stage in their careers. Volunteering with

the CED Project is a way to expand their skill set and to make a difference in the local community at the same time.

Without the support of the CED Project, many nonprofits and small businesses in the District would have no access to the legal assistance they need to run their organizations and manage their businesses safely and effectively. Community-based nonprofits are a vital safety net for D.C. residents living in poverty, while small businesses provide jobs and economic opportunity. Helping nonprofit and small business clients that otherwise would not be able to afford legal services has been so rewarding. But as I often say, another key aspect of finding the right pro bono fit, like finding the right employment fit, is that it's not just about what you're doing but also is about who you're doing it with. With the CED Project, I know I've found a place where I really feel at home.

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