

NEWS

The Good Fight: Meet Connecticut's Pro Bono Champs

By Robert Storage

For some attorneys, doing upward of 300 hours of pro bono work every year, in addition to representing big corporations as a commercial litigator, might seem like a tough balancing act.

But then again, these attorneys have not served three tours of duty in Iraq and one in Afghanistan, like Day Pitney's Rosendo Garza Jr.

Garza, who easily puts in more than 50 billable hours per week at the firm, said he leans on his military experience to find the time to juggle his Day Pitney responsibilities and the pro bono work that gives back to the community.

Garza is one of thousands of attorneys across the state who are giving up their time, energy and money to help others in need. No agency keeps a comprehensive count, but the Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut logged about 4,000 hours of pro bono work by volunteer attorneys helping low-income clients.

That's more than \$1 million worth of services, donated by attorneys who often otherwise charge by the hour.

"You have a job and you figure out a way to do it," Garza said.

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The numbers show that firms, such as Day Pitney, value pro bono. Like others across Connecticut, it follows the American Bar Association standard requiring lawyers to serve clients who cannot afford representation. It requires attorneys to donate at least 50 hours per year to serve low-income clients, nonprofits and others who need their expertise.

But the 38-year-old Garza far exceeds that minimum expectation. When he joined Day Pitney in September 2016, Garza immediately sought out pro bono work. In 2017, he topped 300 hours, earning an award for outpacing the 68 other attorneys in the firm's Hartford office. And this year, he's on track to surpass that performance. It's a big accomplishment for an attorney from Day Pitney, where Connecticut lawyers have logged more than 6,000 pro bono hours so far in 2018.

12 Years' Commitment

Among those putting in the hours are lawyers and paralegals at The Reardon Law Firm in New London, who dedicated 12 1/2 years to a case they handled free of charge.

Attorney Robert Reardon Jr. led the yearslong mission to get tenants out of



Rosendo Garza Jr., with Day Pitney in Hartford

a rat-infested 124-unit complex known as Thames River Apartments. Now, the three high-rise buildings that comprised the complex are vacant. But it took more than a decade of fighting with City Hall and the local housing authority to finally get to the point where, with the help of the law firm and the new members of the housing authority, vouchers were made available via the federal Housing and Urban Development to relocate families so they could rent from private residences in New London and elsewhere.

While Reardon said he thinks the city wanted to wait them out, he had no intention of giving up the fight. The firm spent more than 5,000 hours, valued at about \$1.1 million, fighting for the tenants.

“We had 10 banker boxes of pleadings and correspondences related to this case,” said Reardon, who said he had never even come close to doing more than a decade worth of pro bono work on any other case in his 48-year career. “We also filed 192 pleadings in court, while the case was always aggressively defended by the city and housing authority lawyers.”

And Reardon has no regrets.

“There was no hesitation on spending time on the project,” he said. “Everyone in the firm agreed this was something we needed to do. It was important to us because the New London community has been very generous to us. We owed an obligation to the city to pay it forward.”

Support From Management

Murtha Cullina lawyers feel a similar obligation to their pro bono clients.

According to pro bono chairman Marc Finer, attorneys have the full support of management to help clients in need.

“We actually count, as a firm, up to 100 hours of pro bono work toward our total billable hours per associates and counsel,” Finer said, “That incentivizes both associates and counsel to do pro bono work. One hundred hours [toward total billable hours] is very generous. The

most I’ve ever heard of is 50 hours.”

In total, Murtha Cullina saw attorneys do 1,064 hours of pro bono work in 2017 with a value of \$385,934. To date, in 2018, its team has donated 1,792 hours valued at \$617,167. That’s more than \$1 million over about two years.

The 2018 hike in pro bono hours and value is due, in part, to Local Rule 83.10, which took effect in December 2017, according to Murtha Cullina associate Kristen Zaehring.

“If you are admitted to federal court in Connecticut, you could get assigned



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Garza said.**



to take on pro bono cases [most being prisoner lawsuits],” Zaehring said. “In the past, there was not a set standard for declining such a case. The new rule makes it harder to decline pro bono cases.”

Finer said the new rule had an impact on Murtha Cullina’s increase, but, he said, it’s not clear how many firm attorneys were affected by the rule.

Push During National Pro Bono Week

With National Pro Bono week beginning this week, Connecticut Bar Association President Jonathan Shapiro said the CBA is being more creative in trying to entice attorneys to do their part in helping others without collecting a fee. One strategy entails putting up a billboard, probably along the Interstate 91 corridor, offering free legal assistance to the public.

A major area of focus: training attorneys to assist with housing-related cases.

“We teach them the basics of what the law is behind security deposits, so they can represent tenants who may not have their security deposits properly returned,” Shapiro said.

Fighting for these deposits is common, and could create new hardships for people of modest means.

“It’s all part of our obligation as attorneys,” said Shapiro, principal of Shapiro Law Offices in Middletown. “It’s rewarding when you can make a difference for someone. You have the same opportunity to do good in a small- and medium-sized firm as you do in a large firm.” ■

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