

# PUBLICATION

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## Pro Bono in a Pandemic: The Emergence of a Virtual Community

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We are living in a world where the concepts of "remote work" and "virtual meetings" were thrust upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic; however, these virtual work environments are here to stay. Finding ways to continue pro bono participation in a virtual environment has given legal advocates opportunities to be creative and even cast their nets a little further when it comes to seeking attorney participation. Now, with various virtual pro bono platforms at an attorney's disposal, there are three key opportunities we can take advantage of in order to provide the most effective assistance in the virtual world of pro bono service: (1) participate in virtual legal clinics, (2) attend virtual trainings, and (3) conduct virtual training for lawyers within your practice area, so they too can assist on pro bono matters.

### ***I. Participate in Virtual Clinics***

With the growing need for pro bono services present now more than ever, pro bono resource centers have transitioned many of their clinic programs to virtual clinics. At the forefront of this movement is the increasing number of free legal answer platforms available to low-income individuals (who qualify for these particular legal services). These individuals post their civil legal questions within a portal and/or website and wait for attorney volunteers to respond. Attorney volunteers monitor these portals, select questions to answer, and provide legal advice for the questions posed. The prime example of this is the American Bar Association's nationwide program, [ABA Free Legal Answers](#). A decade ago, Baker Donelson was part of the origin of this platform in Tennessee. Its use has since spread across the country, with Free Legal Answers licensed as a free service for low-income clients in 43 states. It has become a prominent means of offering virtual legal services. More than 145,000 pro bono legal questions have been answered through the site. Free Legal Answers allows for an exchange between client and attorney that is so seamless it can be done from an office computer or a home laptop. If every attorney turned on their laptop at night and provided legal advice to just one of the pro bono clients seeking assistance, imagine how many individuals would be equipped with the legal answers they are in need of.

While many of the free legal answer platforms allow for general civil legal advice, there are other virtual clinics that target specific areas of the law in which virtual services will be provided, including matters involving trusts/estates, immigration, domestic violence, bankruptcy and landlord/tenant disputes.

Although virtual clinics may not allow for in-person communication, the advantage of relying upon online portals, video conferences, and even phone conferences, is that more individuals who need pro bono assistance can access the services they need without the hassle or expense of traveling to a physical location.

### ***II. Attend Virtual Training***

Many pro bono resource centers are now offering online trainings to prepare attorneys to participate in virtual clinics and other various pro bono opportunities. The ever-popular excuse that "this training is in the middle of my workday," does not have to be a crutch anymore. Now, there are countless virtual training opportunities available with the click of a button, so that attorneys can become more familiar with whatever type of pro bono legal services they wish to provide to the community. A few of the pro bono resource services/centers offering these virtual trainings include the [National Immigrant Justice Center \(NIJC\)](#), [The Virginia Law Foundation](#), and [The Maryland Pro Bono Resource Center](#). Since the trainings are recorded, attorneys can also go back and

watch the information multiple times in order to feel more comfortable about diving into a particular type of pro bono project.

An online library of virtual resources has emerged, making it easier for attorneys to utilize these resources, extend their pro bono reach and serve their communities.

### **III. Conduct Virtual Training**

The opposite of attending virtual trainings is actually conducting those trainings yourself. Attorneys who are familiar with a particular practice area that impacts low-income clients, or the non-profit community, can create trainings to teach other attorneys how to effectively provide pro bono services in a particular area of the law. Not only will your trainings be relied upon by other attorneys who are looking for support in their pro bono service, but putting together the trainings will also make you more proficient in that area of service as well. You may be surprised how a brief webinar you put together provides another attorney with the tools he/she needs to counsel a pro bono client.

A virtual environment has emerged within the pro bono community and is here to stay. Harnessing, contributing to, and utilizing these virtual services will only grow the number of individuals and organizations that receive the pro bono services they need.