

# PRESS RELEASE

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## Baker Donelson Receives Prestigious American Bar Association Public Service Award

April 20, 2023

**The law firm of Baker Donelson has received the American Bar Association (ABA) Section of Litigation's 2023 John Minor Wisdom Public Service and Professionalism Award. This prestigious national award is presented in recognition of outstanding contributions to the quality of justice in legal communities, ensuring that the legal system is open and available to all. Baker Donelson received the award at a luncheon during the 2023 Section of Litigation Annual Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 20.**

In addition to its global pro bono work, Baker Donelson was recognized for creating Free Legal Answers (FLA) in 2010 and for the Firm's efforts to provide access to legal representation for those experiencing homelessness. FLA is a website on which anyone, including those who might otherwise not be in the position to receive counsel due to financial or geographic restraints, can receive pro bono legal advice from a volunteer lawyer. Baker Donelson designed the platform to address the justice gap, where it is estimated that low-income Americans do not get any or enough legal help for 92% of their substantial civil legal problems. Baker Donelson originally created the platform and tested it out on a statewide basis in Tennessee.

After several states and local jurisdictions adopted the program, Baker Donelson worked with the ABA to grow FLA into the national program that it is today. In its current form, ABA Free Legal Answers is a virtual legal advice clinic in which qualifying users can post civil legal questions at no cost to be answered by pro bono attorneys licensed in their state. The Firm has continued to provide financial and technological support in maintaining this valuable platform.

Baker Donelson's Pro Bono Committee Chair [Jonathan Cole](#) said, "One of the most significant challenges to ensuring the availability of legal services to the under-served is access. So, Baker Donelson has focused our pro bono efforts on ways to provide that access, whether through an online platform that connects people with attorneys around the country or through clinics to help clients address legal issues that keep them from securing housing or finding a job. It is extremely rewarding to work with people who feel so strongly about devoting their time, talents, and resources to creating solutions that can have such a huge impact on people's lives and our communities."

The Firm's Pro Bono Shareholder [Samuel T. Bowman](#) added, "This recognition is a tremendous honor for our Firm. The significant impact that Free Legal Answers has had is attributable to the talents of countless people, from the members of the Baker Donelson team who originally developed and continue to support the platform to the thousands of attorneys across the country who provide pro bono counsel through this valuable online resource. We are especially grateful to our own [Buck Lewis](#), whose vision and determination has been the driving force behind the creation of the platform and its increasing adoption as a tool that is now used in more than 40 jurisdictions. Buck's spirit exemplifies Baker Donelson's ongoing commitment to the support of Free Legal Answers and improving legal access for all."

A shareholder in Baker Donelson's Memphis office, Mr. Lewis began leading the development of a virtual legal advice clinic while he was serving as president of the Tennessee Bar Association in 2008. He worked with Baker Donelson's IT staff, including Paul Davis, Patrick Zanone, and Scott Osborne, who created and curated

the technology to develop the code for an online program that could connect pro bono lawyers with people who needed legal assistance. In 2010, Mr. Lewis launched the platform in Tennessee, then Baker Donelson shared the code with other states. While Mr. Lewis was serving as chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service, the program was made available nationwide. Baker Donelson licensed the code to the ABA and every single individual jurisdiction for free in exchange for their agreement to help these clients.

Crucial ongoing financial support for FLA has been made possible through the sponsorship of leading organizations, including the American Arbitration Association, AT&T, Entergy, FedEx Ground, Liberty Mutual Insurance, Pilot Company, and State Farm. Since FLA's original launch in Tennessee in 2010, Mr. Lewis has also led efforts to raise more than \$500,000 to support the continued growth and adoption of the platform.

In an example of Baker Donelson's continuing work to enhance and expand FLA's capabilities, in 2022, the Firm added a feature called Question Auto Response (QAR). When a client posts a question on FLA, within seconds QAR emails legal information regarding the client's issues, especially eviction and family law, while they wait for a lawyer to answer their individual question.

Since the launch of ABA Free Legal Answers in 2016, more than 12,000 pro bono attorneys have registered to respond to civil legal questions from income-eligible users in 41 jurisdictions. As of March 31, 2023, the platform had responded to a total of 276,875 questions. FLA is being used by law schools to hold clinics and expose law students to pro bono service for actual clients. The platform's use has also gone international, with sites operating in Australia and Great Britain.

In 2014, Baker Donelson received a Beacon of Justice Award from the National Legal Aid and Defenders Association for the development of the FLA technology.

Mr. Lewis said, "It is incredibly humbling to see the tool we developed become the model for a national platform that has made such a difference in expanding access to legal services. I am extremely proud that Baker Donelson has been so supportive of this venture and is being recognized for its contributions."

Through its commitment to [pro bono representation](#), Baker Donelson provides legal services to groups and individuals whose resources are limited. For decades, the Firm's attorneys have provided a variety of counsel to many underserved populations that have had no options for legal representation. Baker Donelson's efforts include work on a wide range of matters, such as advocating for the homeless and organizations that serve the homeless, providing corporate legal services to non-profit organizations, collaborating with our clients to address particular community needs, and much more. The Firm has been instrumental in efforts such as expanding the Homeless Experience Legal Protection (HELP) program across the Southeast; creating courts dedicated to handling minor legal matters common among the homeless; assisting persons of limited means with obtaining driver's licenses, an essential need in helping these individuals reintegrate into society; and spearheading and organizing volunteer lawyer programs across Baker Donelson's footprint.

Baker Donelson has led the way in the legal industry by being one of the first law firms in the Southeast to create a Pro Bono Committee and designate a Pro Bono Shareholder. To further its commitment to pro bono, Baker Donelson also designates Pro Bono Committee Office Chairs in most of its 23 offices. These chairs are best suited to address local needs while coordinating with the Firm's Pro Bono Shareholder for global pro bono initiatives. This structure ensures Baker Donelson is well-suited to further its goal of addressing broad spectrum needs across the Firm's footprint and beyond.



*Pictured (L to R): Kent Lambert (Baker Donelson New Orleans Office Managing Shareholder), Jonathan Cole (Baker Donelson Pro Bono Committee Chair), Malinda Lewis, George T. "Buck" Lewis (Past President of the Tennessee Bar Association and Past Chair of the ABA Pro Bono Public Service Committee), Linda A. Klein (Baker Donelson Senior Managing Shareholder and Past President of the ABA), and Danny Van Horn (Chair of the ABA Litigation Section and Past President of the TBA)*