

By Gerald L. Chaleff

Our Commitment to Public Service

Los Angeles lawyers must continue their long and proud tradition of pro bono assistance

Traditionally, lawyers have given their time and money generously to serve their profession and their community. We have committed a huge portion of our professional lives to the assistance of others through pro bono activities and pro bono organizations that we establish, fund, and staff. We have made a commitment to others an integral part of what our profession is and who we are. Lawyers have always been willing to come forward and perform public service, at great expense to themselves, to assist their community and government and to protect the rights of all.

Historically, lawyers in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Bar Association have been at the forefront of this tradition. The list of accomplishments by Los Angeles lawyers and the Association is as long as it is impressive. Los Angeles was the birthplace of the public defender system, which was established in 1917. During World War I the Association created its first documented pro bono project, which involved providing free legal aid to servicemen and their families. Over the years, the Association and its members have helped create the Legal Aid Society of Los Angeles; Public Counsel; the Mental Health Advocacy Project and its predecessor, the Special Committee of the Junior Barristers to staff the Psychiatric Department; the Indigent Criminal Defense Appointments Program; the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law; the Barristers Domestic Violence Legal Services Project; HALSA (HIV and AIDs Legal Services Alliance); the Immigration Legal Assistance Project; and others. The Association also established the Los Angeles County Bar Foundation to support legal services programs in Los Angeles County that promote efficiency in, and understanding of, the judicial system and provide assistance to the poor.

In addition, lawyers in Los Angeles have individually volunteered to help those seeking to adopt children, obtain divorces, and file for restraining orders. They have provided tax counseling, represented individuals in unlawful detainer proceedings, and provided mediation services to a wide range of people in need.

Los Angeles lawyers also have donated time and resources to serve and improve the Los Angeles community at large. We have only to look to the Christopher Commission for an example of the valuable public service that has been performed by local lawyers. When the city of Los Angeles needed help, we were there. Beginning in the 1920s, Los Angeles lawyers have participated in investigations of police department misconduct; have been neutral observers at the sites of demonstrations and marches; have conducted investigations of jail conditions; have been members of task forces to improve the civil court system, the district attorney's office, and the criminal justice system; and have filed legal actions to support the courts and other public institutions.

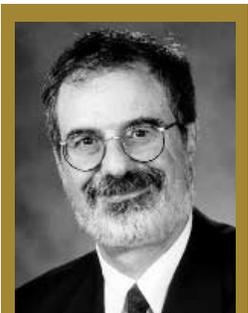
Unfortunately, the commitment to public service seems to be disappearing. Whether it is the drive for increased profits, the fear of a weakening economy, or the diminishing belief that we lawyers all owe a duty to improve society, the principle that lawyers should participate in pro bono activities is no longer emphasized as it was in the past. While not all large law firms have abandoned or reduced their pro bono programs or activities, many have, and even more do not encourage their partners and associates to participate in legal service activities or organizations. Moreover, as a practical matter the hours required of each associate and partner in a law firm do not leave much room for pro bono work. As law firms grow larger, they seem more interested in increasing their *American Lawyer* profit numbers than in promoting service to others. This trend is so prevalent—even among the smaller and mid-sized firms as well as the large firms—that pro bono activity or public service is no longer considered part of our obligation and responsibility.

I recognize that our profession is a business, and that we work hard and deserve to be adequately compensated. However, there comes a point when the drive for that extra dollar comes at the cost of our professional souls. The unrelenting pressure of the “hours derby” is one of the reasons many young lawyers are burned out after a few years of practice. We must find a way to balance the need for a successful business enterprise with the responsibility we have to our community.

I do not pretend to have the answer, but recent examples from the corporate world—such as the Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia, and Tyco fiascos—are troubling indicators of what can happen when business measures itself only by the bottom line. Let the headlines be a warning and not an example to follow.

It is up to each one of us to help our profession retain and renew the spirit of commitment that we so often have demonstrated in the past. We need to ensure that the concept of pro bono service is valued and supported by all.

The consequences of failing to encourage public service will not simply be more lawyer jokes. Without an ethic of public service, both the profession of law and our society will be diminished. ■



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