



Lessons Learned from Collaborating with Law Firms, Law Students and Community Organizations

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Since 2006, the Pro Bono Collaborative (PBC) at Roger Williams University School of Law has provided free legal assistance to thousands of low-income individuals and families. Unlike referral programs, in which one attorney is matched with one client on an urgent basis, the PBC matches law firms and law students with community organizations to provide pro bono legal assistance in a specific area of law that affects a large number of the organizations' clients and fits within the expertise and/or interests of the law firms' attorneys. Many PBC projects involve preventive legal approaches, such as educational workshops and legislative advocacy - which appeal to non-litigators - as well as direct representation cases. The PBC's "project-based model" strives to reach large numbers of people before their legal needs become desperate, while simultaneously creating long-term partnerships between law firms and community organizations.

Recognizing that attorneys in other communities might wish to develop a more inclusive matching service similar to ours, we offer below a few of the PBC's best practices for developing collaborative pro bono programs.

Identifying legal needs in your community

- If you are not partnering with a legal services agency, make efforts to have an attorney assist community partners in identifying the legal needs of their communities. This could be a pro bono service opportunity for an attorney who has some familiarity with the legal issues that affect low income people.
- The PBC uses one of two survey tools to assist—one is a short list of issues and common legal problems and the other a longer questionnaire that identifies the factual circumstances underlying common legal issues.
- PBC projects generally fall into the following categories:
 - Legal rights workshops
 - Non-profit health

- Legislative Advocacy
- Individual legal assistance through advice, counsel and representation

Pitching Projects to Law Firms

- In collaboration with the community based organization, write a project proposal that describes the organization, the legal need, the number of attorneys needed and the extent of the work involved.
- Based on the project proposal create an appealing “pitch” for the project that pulls on the attorneys’ heartstrings or speaks to their skills, interests or available time.
- Create a “menu” of all the pro bono projects available. The PBC sends this out to the participating firms every other month.
- Follow up by e-mail and phone with explanations of why particular projects would be a good fit for the firm.

Incorporating Law Students

- If possible, screen students rather than simply matching students with pro bono projects. With the PBC, students must “apply” to participate. Students must go through an application process that mirrors the process students experience when applying for internships and employment.
- Place students on projects that are aligned with their interests-- make sure the student understands all of the learning opportunities, e.g., substantive area of the law, lawyering skills, type/size of law firm, etc.)
- Once a student is selected, PBC staff schedule an introductory meeting and provide the student with background material about the law firm, the community organization, the development of the project and relevant training materials.
- In addition to assisting the PBC’s volunteer attorneys with legal research and project-related legal tasks, students are urged to see their PBC opportunity as a chance to observe experienced attorneys incorporate pro bono into their professional lives; well or poorly.
- Law students meet as a group three times a year, on campus, to reflect on their experience and discuss how their projects overlap.

Launching Projects

- Ask the law firm and community organization to each designate one person to act as the project liaison, even if several people plan to work with the Collaborative.
- Set up a face-to-face meeting with all project partners- avoid using conference calls for this meeting. Face-to-face meetings provide an important opportunity for project partners to connect on a professional and personal level.
- Create a formal project manual. The PBC manual includes: a Memorandum of Understanding, project goals; contact lists; training materials; and partner roles and responsibilities.
- Create a timeline so that the project partners understand the expectations and to introduce the importance of project momentum.

Maintaining Project Momentum

- Insist that you be copied on all non-confidential correspondence.
- If you haven't heard from anyone in a few weeks, check in with the community partner and encourage them to contact the attorney since they are the client (!).
- Send regular e-mails to the partners checking in on the project.
- Ask the student to contact the attorney at least once a month by email and, if no response, then by phone.

Evaluations

- Make sure your partnering law firms and attorneys provide their pro bono hours and evaluations. Make it clear from the launch of a project that this information is critical.
- Knowing how many hours a firm has invested is very helpful both for providing recognition and for fundraising.
- Keep track of the number of individuals who have been assisted through direct representation and how many have attended legal rights workshops. These can be powerful for fundraising and marketing.

Closing Projects

- Sometimes projects don't work out. If a project isn't moving along despite all your efforts, close it. Don't let it flounder.
- Spend some time debriefing with the project partners, either in a meeting or individually.
- Send a formal closure memo to all partners.

The Pro Bono Collaborative is replicable model. If you would like more information about the model or technical assistance in developing a similar model, please contact Eliza Vorenberg, Director of the PBC at evorenberg@rwu.edu or (401) 254-4597.