

The Pro Bono Innovation Fund: Reports from the Field

by *Dena Bauman*

Dena Bauman is Director of Career and Professional Development and Adjunct Professor at the University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law. This article was submitted on behalf of the NALP Public Service Section.

On the one hand are new law school graduates, eager to hit the ground running, practice law, and build a network. On the other hand are seasoned attorneys, interested in providing service and mentoring new graduates. Both groups are seen working side by side to provide pro bono assistance to underserved communities. Does this model sound too good to be true?

It isn't for Melissa B. Greenberger, who is the Pro Bono Innovator at Nassau/Suffolk Law Services Committee, Inc. Yes, that is really her title. Melissa, who is a Touro Law Center graduate and a civil law practitioner, is funded by a new initiative of the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), which funded 11 grantees in the first cycle of the Pro Bono Innovation Fund.

What is the Pro Bono Innovation Fund? In 2014, using a congressional appropriation of nearly \$4 million, LSC awarded funding to current LSC grantees around the country. According to LSC, Pro Bono Innovation Fund projects will seek to:

- Address barriers to pro bono service by developing new and replicable solutions that serve clients and engage pro bono volunteers more efficiently and effectively.
- Improve efficiency, and expand collaboration and resource-sharing with other service providers or stakeholders in a city, state, or region.

Funding covers an 18- to 24-month project period, and projects are expected to demonstrate an awareness of broad trends and best practices as understood in the national justice community, including use of technology, unifying diverse communities, and serving hard-to-reach populations. Although there is

no requirement to collaborate with specific stakeholders, partnerships are a core component of effective projects and the current range of projects exhibit wide collaboration. Only current LSC grantees are eligible.

In New York State, the grantee is Legal Assistance of Western New York, which is working with six subgrantees who provide LSC-funded services outside of New York City. The grant builds on two major pro bono initiatives begun by the Honorable John Lippman, Chief Judge. One requires 50 hours of pro bono service as a requirement for New York State bar licensing as of January 2015. The other judicial initiative is the establishment of an Attorney Emeritus Program to encourage experienced attorneys to provide 60 hours of pro bono service.

Melissa's role, as a part-time coordinator, links the two communities through a family court project. The project focuses on child support for custodial parents in Suffolk County. The project is scheduled to launch this month (June 2015) and is currently limited to pro se assistance. Law students and volunteer attorneys will screen potential clients. For those accepted, the menu of services may include assisting with the preparation of petitions for initial support orders, petitions for modifications to or enforcement of an existing support order and educating litigants on their rights and the court process. As the project gets underway, Melissa is interviewing, recruiting, and training the students and more seasoned attorneys. Melissa notes that the project gives law students the opportunity to work with practicing attorneys and benefit from their skills and experience — beginning a mentoring relationship that in turn assists parents sorely in need of legal representation.

Across the country, the state of Montana is also incorporating law student participation into its model. Montana has more than 145,000 square miles with only one attorney for every 14,000 people living in poverty. The project, called Montana Pro Bono Connect, will address the challenges of civil legal service delivery by targeting and alleviating barriers to pro bono participation by solo practitioners, small firms, government attorneys, law students, and paralegals. The initiative is featuring technology initiatives that include the development of Montana Online Justice, an online platform where eligible clients can post legal questions and receive advice from volunteer attorneys, enhanced case management to support volunteers and to improve intake, and other expanded resources. Pro bono coordinator Angie Wagenhals says, "Montana Legal Services is excited to continue work on Montana Pro Bono Connect — a project that we hope will create meaningful pro bono opportunities for law students. Fostering pro bono projects that allow for law student involvement helps to bridge the gap in access to justice for those unable to afford an attorney and provides invaluable, real-world experience for law students."

Other current Pro Bono Innovation grantees are located in California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Washington. Examples of their projects include services to rural residents by Colorado Legal Services, senior services by the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, and a military veterans' "hotline" by the Maryland Legal Service Bureau. For more information about the Pro Bono Innovation Fund, see <http://grants.lsc.gov/apply-for-funding/pro-bono-innovation-fund>. ■

