

## Legal Services to the Public Committee

The PBA Legal Services to the Public Committee (formerly Equal Justice for the Poor Committee) is the standing committee of the Pennsylvania Bar Association responsible for promoting civil legal aid for the neediest among us in the commonwealth. Supported by the PBA Pro Bono Office, the committee focuses on issues of concern to the Pennsylvania Legal Assistance Network and to private practice pro bono attorneys. The committee has co-chairs who serve staggered two-year terms, promoting continuity of mission, and two vice-chairs who provide for the development of future committee leadership. There are four regularly meeting subcommittees: Local Support, Pro Bono Conference, Development and Law Schools. These subcommittees are chaired by the co-chairs and the vice-chairs of the committee. When needed, ad hoc subcommittees are created to deal with issues needing focused attention. One such ad hoc subcommittee covered common law marriage, an issue the Legislature has finally given some closure to by eliminating it prospectively. There remains some concern about educating the public about this change in the law, however.

The committee holds regular meetings and conference calls throughout year. It organized and ran its fourth Pro Bono Conference tied to the annual meeting in Pittsburgh on Wednesday, May 4, 2005.<sup>1</sup> The committee publishes “Spotlight” articles in the *Pennsylvania Bar News*<sup>2</sup> and publishes an occasional electronic newsletter<sup>3</sup>. Pro Bono awards are given each year.<sup>4</sup> The committee also supports the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation by promoting the Goffman Awards as the highest pro bono honor in Pennsylvania. The committee works with other organizations, such as local bars and Pennsylvania Legal Services, to nominate deserving pro bono attorneys for other awards both in Pennsylvania and nationally. Two new awards were implemented for the 2005 Pro Bono Conference — an award for a judge and an award for a civil legal aid attorney.<sup>5</sup>

The Pro Bono Office and the committee have spent significant time this past year working on and promoting two electronic tools to help serve the civil legal aid needs of the state. The first, PALawHelp.Org<sup>6</sup>, was designed as a pro se site for clients, but has evolved into a tool utilized more heavily by attorneys and others looking to find resources for clients. The site provides the structural backbone for the Office of General Counsel’s Virtual Law Clinic that was featured at this year’s American Bar Association’s Equal Justice Conference. That program, jointly organized by the PBA, Pennsylvania Legal Services, the Dauphin County Bar Association and MidPenn Legal Services, connects clients who qualify for legal services but cannot be helped because of limited resources, with OGC lawyers who try to help them work through their legal concerns.

PAprobono.net<sup>7</sup> is an even more ambitious project designed to provide resources for pro bono attorneys and to help facilitate the matching of providers and their cases with interested and

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.pabar.org/pdf/05anmtgbrochureweb.pdf> for the Annual Meeting Program and the Pro Bono Conference agenda.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.pabar.org/probono/pbsaa.shtml> for past articles.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.pabar.org/cgi-bin/elx.cgi?cenews.dat> for past newsletters.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.pabar.org/probono/pbaw.shtml> for 2005 winners and a list of all past winners.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.pabar.org/probono/ReedMemo.pdf> for more detail on the two new awards.

<sup>6</sup> The website is described at <http://www.pabar.org/palawhelpinfo.shtml>.

<sup>7</sup> This website is described at <http://www.pabar.org/probono/featuresPAprobononet.shtml>.

competent pro bono lawyers. Law firms, law schools and legal services providers are currently meeting to determine how best to utilize this site in Pennsylvania. The promise of the site is great; in San Francisco, over 85 percent of all pro bono placements occur through the site. Much of the 9/11 pro bono support was organized through the New York version of the Web site. The Web site allows programs to target lawyers in specific areas with specific interests so that the whole field is not bombarded with irrelevant material. An IOLTA Pro Bono Grant for July 2005 through June 2006 will allow for greater emphasis on Paprobono.net.