

This evening the Lancaster Bar Association Foundation does me the great honor of attaching my name to its work in meeting the legal service needs of the poor. Accessing the justice system is a financial challenge to most of us. However, it would appear to be impossible to those who are unemployed, experiencing homelessness or otherwise living on the margins.

This evening we mark the establishment of an endowment as a new and additional, permanent tool we can use to serve the neediest among us. The fact that my name is attached to a fund in that endowment is secondary to the good work of the people and organizations involved with providing that pro bono publico service.

If you were to ask someone what pro bono publico means most likely the answer you would get is “providing free legal service to the poor.” But that isn’t what it means at all – it means “for the public good. “

People who think harder than maybe you or I on ideas such as that will tell you that there is an innate urge in the human heart to help those less fortunate than yourself. But attaching such universal importance to such a personal act is another thing entirely. The Talmud teaches that “whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.” And the Gospels tell us that when confronted with a choice we are obligated to choose the option that’s serves the needs of poor.

However, the truth is that we live in a time animated more by an attitude of “devil take the hindmost” than by “a preferential option for the poor.”

But we know that it is a good thing for the public as a whole when poor people have legal representation when they need it. People without a lawyer worry about facing a child custody hearing or the possible eviction from a home and do not have their minds on their jobs or the others essentials of daily living. Society as a whole benefits from the pro bono publico work of lawyers, the legal profession and the organized bar. We in our Commonwealth do that by working with clients without charge to them, by funding a custody attorney position at MidPenn Legal Services, by lobbying for continued and increased government funding for legal services, and much, much more.

And those of you in the room who are not lawyers may partner in that work by making a financial contribution in support of the foundation and legal services. But you can do one thing more. You can call or write your elected representatives both in Harrisburg and in Washington and all you have to say is “I support legal services and you should too.”