



# Celebrate Alabama's Pro Bono Week

*By Phil D. Mitchell*

**T**his year, the Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service of the American Bar Association has sponsored the first National Pro Bono Celebration, scheduled to be held October 25 through 31, 2009. Currently, 940,000 Alabamians live in poverty, and of these, one in every four experiences legal problems. The majority of these problems are civil problems; consumer issues (creditor harassment, utility non-payment, bankruptcy); health issues (Medicaid, government insurance, nursing home); family law issues (divorce, child support/custody, abuse); employment issues (unemployment benefits, pension, lost employment); and housing issues (unsatisfactory repairs, foreclosure, eviction, poor living conditions). Many of these issues are critical to the citizen's safety and independence.

Presently, there are fewer than 55 paid legal aid lawyers to serve more than 422,000 low-income households in our state. Funding for low-income Alabamians who need civil legal assistance has not yet been adequately met, with the consequences being a lack of access to justice which is devastating to the poor and which weakens our democratic society as a whole. Pro bono lawyers have been called upon to assist in this crisis, and, last year alone, 2,772 members of Alabama's legal community donated 5,220 hours in free legal services and made generous financial contributions to legal aid organizations in our state. These efforts must be recognized and further efforts encouraged.

The Pro Bono Week Celebration is a coordinated national effort to showcase the great difference that pro bono lawyers make to the nation, its system of justice, its communities and, most of all, to the ever-growing needs of this country's most vulnerable citizens. Although national in its breadth, this celebration provides an opportunity for local legal associations across the

country to collaboratively commemorate the contributions of America's lawyers and also to recruit additional lawyers to meet the growing need. To this end, Alabama State Bar Past President Mark White saw the need to extend this celebration to our state and appointed the Pro Bono Celebration Task Force and charged it to plan and coordinate Alabama's activities during this important week. Current state bar President Tom Methvin has joined in the efforts with his announcement that the major initiatives of his term will include increased funding for "Access to Justice" with the goal of protecting the legal rights of people living in poverty.

Alabama's Celebrate Pro Bono Week is an opportunity for bar associations and attorneys across the state to plan events in recognition of individuals who currently do pro bono work and to encourage others to do the same. In order to facilitate increased focus on a wide array of pro bono activities, the task force is planning to include activities or events in every judicial circuit in Alabama. The task force is working with all segments of the legal community from law students to judges. Local bar associations, Alabama's judicial associations, Alabama's volunteer lawyer programs, Legal Services Alabama, Alabama's law schools, individual lawyers, and others will collaborate with the Alabama State Bar, through the task force, in publicizing and holding events locally as well as statewide.

Since its inception, the task force has already obtained proclamations by Alabama Governor Bob Riley, by each of the three Alabama judges' associations, by the Alabama State Bar Board of Bar Commissioners and by the cities of Tuscaloosa and Demopolis, recognizing October 25 through 31, 2009 as Pro Bono Week and encouraging participation in the Alabama State Bar's efforts in recognizing the contributions of our legal community

helping those most in need. Many more such proclamations are soon to come, further advancing the publicity of Alabama's Pro Bono Week Celebration.

During the celebration, the task force will work with local bar presidents and bar commissioners to speak on the topic of pro bono and Access to Justice to various local civic organizations throughout the state. Alabama State Bar Leadership Forum Class 5 plans to hold three legal assistance clinics during that time period as their class project. These clinics will be held in Demopolis, Selma and Tuskegee. Other events currently being planned include various advice and assistance clinics, including Wills for Heroes events, events providing assistance to the elderly, events providing assistance on mortgage foreclosures, continuing legal education events, and even a fund-raising "dinner theater" presentation by volunteer lawyers in Mobile. Continue to check the "Celebrate Pro Bono Week" section of the Alabama State Bar's Web site at [www.alabar.org](http://www.alabar.org) for more information on events and how you can be a part of the celebration.

Please join the Alabama State Bar's efforts in celebrating Pro Bono Week this October 25 through 31, 2009 to commend Alabama's attorneys for their ongoing pro bono contributions and, if you have not already done so, continue the celebration by joining one of the various volunteer lawyer programs throughout the state to provide much needed pro bono legal services to those otherwise unable to obtain justice. ▲▼▲



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