

## Nonprofit Groups Get Pro Bono Boost from Business Lawyers

By Richard S. Hobish and Maurice K. Segall

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Statewide there are a variety of pro bono opportunities for in-house counsel and other attorneys with business law expertise. Highlighted here is a premier pro bono program for in-house counsel, which is based in White Plains, NY.*

Contrary to popular belief, many excellent opportunities exist for in-house counsel to engage in meaningful pro bono activities. Assisting nonprofit organizations with their business legal needs is at the top of the list. Nonprofits have similar organizational legal needs as for-profit entities, but are often unable to afford legal advice. As a result, they often make important decisions with serious legal implications without the benefit of legal counsel of any kind.

The Pro Bono Partnership, a tax-exempt public charity assisting nonprofit organizations in Westchester County, NY, Fairfield County, CT, and New Jersey, is helping to address this problem. The Partnership recruits, coordinates, and supervises volunteer attorneys from leading corporations and law firms to provide business legal services to its clients – nonprofits that are serving the poor and disadvantaged or otherwise providing important social services in our communities.

Thanks to the participation of more than 900 in-house and law firm lawyers, since 1997 the Partnership has been able to provide free business legal services to over 850 qualifying nonprofit organizations on more than 2,300 discrete and manageable legal matters. The Partnership also serves as a national model for other in-house pro bono programs.

Some examples of legal needs addressed by in-house counsel include:

- A nonprofit organization working with victims of domestic violence required assistance negotiating contracts with funding sources, reviewing its bylaws and personnel policies, negotiating leases for space in its building, and terminating an employee.
- An independent living association working with people with developmental disabilities needed assistance from an environmental attorney concerning



Maurice K. Segall, left, and Richard S. Hobish, right, are the Deputy Director and Executive Director, respectively, of the Pro Bono Partnership, which works with leading corporations and law firms to deliver pro bono service to nonprofits serving the community.

whether to accept the donation of potentially contaminated land formerly used as gas station and car dealership.

- A nonprofit organization developing books for underserved mothers and their newborns needed help from an intellectual property lawyer in obtaining copyright protection for its new product.
- A large, multi-faceted social service organization required corporate law help in consolidating its various corporate entities into the parent organization.
- A program offering parent education and support programs to low-income families had been working as a program of a state agency and needed help in becoming an independent nonprofit, tax-exempt organization.

Applying the legal knowledge they use in the course of their daily work, in-house attorneys help address these and other legal issues for the Partnership's nonprofit clients. As a result, employment issues are successfully resolved, intellectual property is protected, bylaws and personnel policies are created and updated, leases are reviewed, litigation is avoided, tax disputes are addressed, and new tax-exempt organizations are created. Ultimately, these efforts are helping to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and provide important health and social services to individuals and families in need.

In-house counsel throughout new York may find that nonprofit organizations in their areas would welcome such legal advice. In the words of one of our corporate volunteers, providing pro bono help to nonprofit organizations will help you

“keep sharp, hone your skills, meet some great new people, and do some good for organizations that interest you.”

For more information about the Partnership, please visit our Web site at [www.probonopartnership.org](http://www.probonopartnership.org) or call (914) 328-0674.

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have to make a real difference in the lives of many of these people. Doing the “right [legal] thing” by an indigent client can often significantly improve the quality of that person's life.

No matter how rewarding and fulfilling pro bono legal practice might be, it seems improbable that an in-house pro bono legal program can succeed without an appropriate “corporate culture,” and the support (including training resources) of organizations such as VLSP. Prior experience indicates that pro bono legal service is most likely to thrive in an environment where (1) senior legal management recognizes the value and importance of performing pro bono legal service, and (2) takes a proactive role in nurturing pro bono legal participation so that it is viewed as something more than an extracurricular activity.

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