

# The Senior Lawyer



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# Skills-Based Volunteering: Good for Communities and Good for You

By Courtney Darts

There is a lot of scientific research and anecdotal evidence to support the idea that volunteering helps not only the beneficiary, but also the volunteer. A recent *New York Times* article noted that the health benefits linked to volunteering include lower blood pressure and decreased mortality rates.<sup>1</sup> Of course, lawyers know that volunteering is important for many reasons; as a profession, we believe pro bono to be a fundamental obligation. But there is still a perception among some lawyers that pro bono means litigation and that pro bono opportunities for non-litigators don't exist. The truth is, there is no shortage of business legal assistance needed by amazing charitable organizations in New York. Nonprofit organizations have similar business legal needs as for-profit companies—they need contracts reviewed, leases negotiated, tax laws explained, and employment issues resolved. But for many small and even mid-sized nonprofits, hiring a lawyer to advise on day-to-day matters is not financially possible. In the absence of pro bono assistance, these organizations can only move forward without a lawyer and hope for the best.

## Typical Nonprofit Legal Matters

- Compliance
- Contracts
- Corporate structure and governance
- Dissolution and bankruptcy
- Employment
- Incorporation/tax exemption
- Intellectual property
- Lending/finance
- Mergers/collaborations
- Real estate
- Tax

## Pro Bono Resources

Pro Bono Partnership (the Partnership) is a 501(c)(3) organization that has been providing free transactional legal services to nonprofits in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut for 20 years. The Partnership is the result of the vision of several corporate attorneys and the support of General Electric Company, and the founders' goal remains the same today: to strengthen nonprofits and communities by providing pro bono opportunities for in-house counsel and law firm attorneys in the neighborhoods where they live and work. Each year, Pro Bono Partnership's requests for legal assistance have increased. Thankfully, so have the number of our volunteer attorneys and supporters. For our nonprofit clients, the Partnership and its volunteers provide a range of transactional legal services free of charge. For our volunteers, the Partnership

provides pre-screened, discrete pro bono matters; supportive expertise in nonprofit law; and model documents if needed. Many of our volunteers note that their pro bono matters are among their most rewarding professional experiences because of the satisfaction that comes from helping a good cause and the gratitude of their clients.

## Whatever Your Interest, There's an Organization That Needs Pro Bono

From health and human services to education or animal welfare, there are all kinds of organizations that can more effectively further their missions with expert legal advice. Working with a pro bono provider like the Partnership, a lawyer can select pro bono matters based on the causes that are personally meaningful to that lawyer and, of course, the area of law in which the lawyer practices. Volunteers can choose to work with organizations close to home, or close to their hearts, since most of these matters are discrete and do not require in-person assistance. And there are resources to help any New York lawyer find the right pro bono provider. The New York State Bar Association's Department of Pro Bono Affairs (<http://www.nysba.org/probono/>) and the New York Attorney Emeritus Program (<https://www.nycourts.gov/attorneys/volunteer/emeritus/>) can help connect lawyers to legal service agencies assisting charitable nonprofits throughout New York State.

## Start Today!

Lending your professional expertise to a nonprofit organization extends the impact of your volunteerism far broader than the matters you resolve. Helping a nonprofit strengthen its practices and avoid risk makes a genuine difference in the lives of the constituents the organization serves. Add to this the potential health benefits and the sense of purpose associated with giving back, and it's clear that "the best things in life are free" applies to both the giver and the recipient!

## Endnote

- 1 Nicole Karlis, *Why Doing Good Is Good for the Do-Gooder*, The New York Times, October 26, 2017; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/mind/why-doing-good-is-good-for-the-do-gooder.html?emc=eta1>.

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