

Hacking Away at the Access to Justice Gap: Welcoming a New Generation for Success



By Karen DeMeola

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According to Model Rule 6.1, lawyers should aspire to render at least 50 hours per year of pro bono legal services to people of limited means or to nonprofit organizations that provide resources for people who do not have the means.

On November 2, 2015, new attorneys were sworn into the profession. Chief Justice Rogers and Justice Robinson as well as CBA President Bill Clendenen addressed the access to justice gap and the importance of pro bono service. The YLS Pro Bono Fair, which took place on November 9, provided an opportunity for new attorneys to connect with legal service providers throughout the state. Attendees were challenged by Judge Moll to walk away with the contact information from an organization and to follow up within the week. The message to new attorneys consistently has been a reminder of the obligations we have as attorneys and the importance of using our privilege to help underserved communities.

Law students across the country receive messaging during the matriculation process, at student orientation, and throughout their time in law school. The *ABA Standards for Approval of Law Schools* requires law schools to provide pro bono opportunities to students. One need only look at the ABA website to see the commitment law schools and law students have regarding pro bono. Many schools, certainly all those in Connecticut, provide hours of pro bono service. In addition to providing direct service to impoverished populations, law school clinics provide invaluable opportunities for students and help to meet the justice gap.

Pro bono pledge programs (both required and not), and student organizations across the country have found ways to serve communities with the greatest need. If there is a desire and, of course, a practicing attorney to supervise the programs, students are encouraged to explore and create pro bono opportunities thus showing an innovative, entrepreneurial spirit, and desire to do good. Many times the programs created are sustainable only if the torch is passed from one student or organization to another. The development of such programs takes dedication and time and engaging millennials in conversations about access to justice could go a long way in solving some of the challenges.

Recently, I was invited to participate in a Social Justice Hackathon. Upon seeing the word "hackathon" I started sweating and flashed back to my first computer, an old IBM 286 my law school buddy Keith passed on when he upgraded. With Keith's guidance, I learned about the Internet, first-person video gaming, and a pro-

gram called Objection! designed to help with the rules of evidence. My electronic display typewriter was moved to the closet with my albums and 8 tracks. I was hooked...until the day I attempted to replace the motherboard. Keith, at this point back in the Bahamas, talked me through the process of removing all the parts and installing the new board. He was a calm and cool Bahamian, but the tone in his voice changed as he slowly and methodically told me the importance of "grounding" myself lest horrible things happen. I tried hard not to imagine my new expensive motherboard catching fire and burning down the apartment, and cursing myself for not following anyone's advice regarding renter's insurance. It was unnerving and the hackathon invitation brought the sense of panic and flooding back.

Shaking the memory and reading the invitation to the Social Justice Hackathon also called to mind the *ABA Journal's* "Hackcess to Justice" events. Such competitions bring together lawyers and tech developers to help solve the access to justice gap. Winning teams have developed some interesting apps that help migrant farm workers, process efficiencies, means tests, and other similarly innovative projects.

The framework holding up the Hackcess events is the collaboration among stakeholders and across areas of expertise. It is also a fantastic example of how generations can work well together to solve a pressing need. Baby boomers have the knowledge and expertise. To an extent, so do the Gen-Xers. With that said, we are an individualized generation but have paid our dues professionally. Millennials are diverse, innovative, digital natives who work well in collaborative settings and think beyond traditional methods. These characteristics are not always revered but they should be harnessed. This is a perfect generation to lend their voice and talents to the access to justice conversation, including pro bono service.

Starting new pro bono opportunities is imperative but such programs must be sustainable, and must be tailored to meet the needs. We need to connect our new attorneys and law students to the varied opportunities available. We need the infrastructure to make sustainable programs possible; a corps of attorneys to work with volunteers, including law students; partnerships with attorneys in all fields and practice areas; and a communication strategy that allows attorneys and the public to access information about available programs. Collaboration will be key to the success of a statewide pro bono model. The CBA has been involved in conversations with thought leaders throughout the state and will continue to work toward increasing the number of attorneys who provide pro bono services and closing the justice gap.

Let's get hacking! **CL**