

SIGNATURE PROJECTS: A PRO BONO MODEL OF FOCUS AND COMMITMENT

What is a Signature Project?

Signature projects have become a popular pro bono model for legal departments. These projects, sometimes referred to as a “thematic projects,” are ongoing, department-wide pro bono initiatives that harness the full power of a legal department to address a major legal need. The key elements of a signature project are focus and commitment. As opposed to working on a wide array of pro bono projects that touch lightly on a variety of issues, in-house attorneys working on a signature project may achieve greater impact by focusing on a single theme, issue, client group, or community, addressing it with multiple approaches over time in an effort to “move the needle” to close the access to justice gap.

Why are Signature Projects Effective?

Signature projects offer a variety of unique benefits to both the implementing legal department and the recipients of its pro bono services. Some of those benefits include:

- **Community**: Smaller-scale pro bono projects often utilize only a portion of a legal department’s staff. Signature projects have the potential to bring the entire legal department together, creating cohesion between employees who might otherwise have little interaction with each other. The sense of community created as employees come together to work on a common goal for the signature project carries over to the department’s everyday work.
- **Pro Bono Profile**: Signature projects are a great way to take a department’s pro bono work to the next level. They often increase interest in pro bono and result in broader participation in pro bono work. Further, by focusing on a theme, issue, or specific client group, volunteers may be able to develop more expertise and increase the ability to assess the impact of the department’s pro bono work. Finally, they are highly attractive to potential pro bono partners and can be the source of positive publicity and media coverage.
- **Quality of Pro Bono**: Signature projects have the potential to deliver more impact to the recipients of a department’s pro bono work than do smaller-scale projects. Signature projects increase the number of lawyers and legal staff dedicated to a given problem, and diversify the perspectives and skills available. In addition, the ongoing nature of the signature project creates more thorough and sustainable outcomes for the recipient and supports systemic change that improves the law, the legal system, and the lives of clients.

How can I Develop a Signature Project?

As signature projects are inherently substantial commitments, the decision to begin one should not be taken lightly. Here are some steps to initiating and developing a successful signature project:

- Reality Check: While signature projects carry many great benefits, they are also a substantial undertaking. A department considering a signature project should make sure that its staff is prepared to devote the time and resources the project will require and can do so without diminishing a department's other ongoing pro bono work.
- Selecting a Signature Project: It is critical that a department perform thorough research before making a commitment to a signature project. Some questions it should consider are:
 - Will this project provide opportunities for different practice areas and specialties and generate enough work to engage the entire department? Or, on the other hand, is the topic so broad that it begins to lose shape as a single project?
 - Is there a real, critical legal need and a way to access the work?
 - What are our strengths as a department and what type of project would most effectively make use of those strengths?
- Preparing for a Signature Project: A signature project must have broad institutional support from the start in order to be successful. This means not only the approval of the department's top leadership, but also a general consensus of support from staff. Further, as signature projects are ambitious in scope, it is important that the legal department is prepared to commit significant time to the project.
- Partnership: While ownership of the effort is a critical element of a signature project, partnering with the right public interest group and/or law firm is a must. The quality of the pro bono service a signature project provides will depend on the successful combination of the legal abilities and expertise of all partners and their working relationship.
- Holistic Approach: It is often beneficial for a legal department to align its signature project with its non-legal community service and charitable giving initiatives. In doing so, departments can increase efficiencies in organization and execution. Uniting an entire company around a single theme or cause provides opportunities for collaboration across offices and practices. Also, by adding a legal element to existing efforts, the impact of the entire organization's effort may be greater than the sum of its parts.
- Personnel: From the beginning, a legal department should establish a core group of attorneys and staff who are especially committed to the project's success. To ensure the signature project remains relevant to the entire legal department it is important to communicate regularly regarding successes and opportunities.
- Testing and Development: A department should have a clear plan for its project from the outset but be prepared for change as the program matures. A signature project should be developed carefully over time, and a department should test processes and opportunities to make sure they are a good fit. As the signature project begins to grow, make sure to be flexible. Identify new partners and let the project expand to fit the clients' needs.

- **Celebrate Victories:** A proud and invested legal department is an effective legal department. Encourage employee support by demonstrating the value of pro bono successes, through features in publications, celebratory events, and awards, for example.

EXAMPLES OF CORPORATE SIGNATURE PROJECTS

There are many examples of legal departments that have engaged in pro bono signature projects. Some departments choose to form large-scale, collaborative partnerships with existing legal services organizations to serve a particular cause, such as immigration. Other in-house legal teams have developed novel programs and even new legal services organizations to address a critical legal need or fill a gap in existing services. Still other companies have developed tools to support or increase efficiencies of legal services.

Below are examples of each of these different types of corporate signature projects.

Robust Partnerships with Legal Services Organizations

- **Amazon: National Partnership with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND):** Since 2017, Amazon's legal department, KIND, Bet Tzedek, and Davis Wright Tremaine (DWT) have created a multicity large-scale partnership to provide legal services to unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children. Pro bono volunteers work in teams representing children on Special Immigrant Juvenile Status cases. Attorneys at all levels of experience as well as paralegals and legal assistants participate in the project in offices around the country, including in Los Angeles; New York; Newark, New Jersey; San Francisco; Seattle; and Washington, D.C. To prepare volunteers, KIND broadcast a national educational webinar from Amazon Studios in LA to all of the participating cities. Afterwards, KIND and Bet Tzedek (LA only) conducted in-depth trainings with the six Amazon divisions across the country to ensure volunteers had the competence necessary to be effective advocates. The kickoff events were in a clinic-style setting and held at DWT offices across five cities and at Audible's offices in Newark. This allowed all the teams to meet their clients, to connect as a team, receive additional training and materials, and meet their mentoring attorneys.

Founding of New Programs or Partnerships

- **Microsoft: Founding of KIND (Kids In Need Of Defense):** In August 2003, Microsoft developed Volunteer Advocates for Immigrant Justice (VAIJ), a joint initiative with the American Bar Association's Commission on Immigration Policy, Practice and Pro Bono, which matched pro bono attorneys with detained immigrants pursuing claims for relief. With the support of several local law firms, Microsoft built VAIJ into a standalone, self-supporting legal services organization headed by an independent full-time staff, placing hundreds of cases with pro bono teams at Microsoft and with other Seattle-area volunteers.

Building on its incredible success with VAIJ, Microsoft moved to expand the scope of its pro bono efforts nationally in serving unaccompanied immigrant children. Together with

actress and UNHCR Special Envoy, Angelina Jolie, Microsoft founded Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), a nonprofit organization that recruits and trains law firms, law departments, NGOs, and volunteers to represent unaccompanied juvenile immigrants and to advocate for policy changes. In 2012, VAIJ became the Seattle office of KIND.

KIND is now Microsoft's signature pro bono partner in the United States. Through KIND, about 75 lawyers and professionals participate annually in representing unaccompanied minors in their immigration proceedings. The pro bono project ties to Microsoft's overall corporate philosophy with respect to supporting immigrant and refugee communities worldwide. Microsoft also has representation on KIND's board.

More recently, Microsoft partnered with Covington and Burling to establish KIND UK, which prepares applications for long-term residency for children who have been living in the UK for at least seven years but have no legal right to reside there.

- Walmart: Founding of Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP): In November 2010, the Walmart Legal Department announced plans to undertake an in-house pro bono program in which its attorneys, paralegals, and support staff will participate in legal aid projects in the Arkansas community. The Walmart Foundation provided a \$115,000 donation to Legal Aid of Arkansas and the Arkansas Access to Justice Commission. The grant helped the Commission continue its efforts to address key issues raised by low-income clients, including family law, consumer practice, financial, housing, and employment matters, and assisted Legal Aid of Arkansas in funding its Medical-Legal Partnership with Mid-Delta Health Systems, which serves patients in six of Arkansas' poorest counties, located in the Mississippi River Delta area. Pro bono volunteers take on legal cases to serve clients of the medical-legal partnership.
- Amazon: Founding of Mary's Place: In 2016, Amazon began providing Mary's Place Family Shelter with temporary use of a vacant building on Amazon's campus to house women, children, and families experiencing homelessness in Seattle. The next year, Amazon announced that it would build a permanent family shelter, Mary's Place Family Center, which opened in early March 2020 within an Amazon office building in the center of Amazon's Seattle headquarters. The shelter is the largest family shelter in Washington State with over 63,000 square feet of usable space to sleep 275 moms, dads, and children every night.

Among other services, the Amazon legal department provides pro bono legal assistance to families in the shelter. Since 2018, Amazon's legal team has supported hundreds of Mary's Place guests and volunteered more than a thousand pro bono hours, and now they can do so on site at the new permanent shelter. There is a dedicated space for Amazon attorneys to provide monthly pro bono legal clinics on a variety of issues including credit and debt, personal injury, housing and tenant rights. Amazon also donated laptops to provide virtual support for the clinic.

Developing Tools to Support Legal Services

- Capital One: Development of Justice Server: At the inaugural Supreme Court of Virginia Pro Bono Summit in 2010, Capital One’s General Counsel pledged to provide in-kind pro bono contributions from both its Legal and Technology Departments to facilitate efforts to bridge the “access to justice gap” in its home state of Virginia and beyond. In 2011, Capital One’s Legal Department hosted a gathering of regional pro bono leaders at its Richmond campus and announced a seed grant for the development of a new software program that could serve as both (1) a new case management system for resource-constrained legal aid organizations in Central Virginia, and (2) a portal to connect volunteer attorneys from the private sector with pro bono legal aid clients, thus enabling “distance pro bono lawyering.” National and regional law firms and other corporate legal departments matched Capital One’s seed grant, and over the course of just a few days raised several hundred thousand dollars to fund the development of a new state-of-the-art software tool which became JusticeServer®.

Over the next two years, Capital One lawyers and technologists worked with lawyers from the Greater Richmond Bar Foundation (GRBF), Central Virginia Legal Aid Society (CVLAS), and the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) to develop JusticeServer, a cloud-based Salesforce application. The case management side of JusticeServer was launched in 2012, when CVLAS and LAJC began using it as their principal case management system, and to date, the system has been used to manage more than 35,000 legal aid cases benefitting more than 81,000 pro bono clients. The volunteer portal of JusticeServer launched in 2013, and since that time, pro bono lawyers in Virginia have used JusticeServer to provide pro bono legal services on more than 9,000 legal aid cases benefitting more than 24,000 pro bono clients on myriad civil legal matters (e.g., domestic relations, consumer law, housing, bankruptcy, employment, immigration). The system has also been used to provide pro bono legal services to hundreds of nonprofit organizations through GRBF’s Pro Bono Clearinghouse program. Today, there are more than 1,200 volunteer attorneys registered to take pro bono cases on JusticeServer.

- Dentsu Aegis Network (DAN): Disaster Relief Legal Services Public Relations Campaign: In 2019, Dentsu Aegis Network launched a large-scale initiative to leverage its employees’ marketing and communications skills to improve people’s knowledge of their legal rights and encourage more lawyers to do pro bono work in the aftermath of natural disasters and emergencies. DAN kicked off the program with a hackathon on disaster legal services and the challenges in educating communities and mobilizing lawyers. Participants, divided into six diverse teams including employees from different agencies, seniority levels and departments (e.g., media planning, communications, data analysis, creative), designed innovative campaigns to improve the delivery of disaster legal services. DAN then worked in partnership with Pro Bono Net to launch a two-part media campaign to 1) connect volunteer attorneys to disaster relief volunteer opportunities, trainings and resources, and 2) help inform underserved communities impacted by natural disasters about their legal rights and connect them with self-help information and legal help resources.

Here at Corporate Pro Bono, we have witnessed the power of the signature project model when implemented with great care and responsibility. If you have any questions about signature projects or any other aspect of in-house pro bono, please contact CPBO at cpbo@probonoinst.org.

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