



IN-HOUSE PRO BONO IN PRACTICE PROFILE: AMERICAN EXPRESS TRAVEL RELATED SERVICES COMPANY, INC.

December 2011

Program Background and Infrastructure

In 2002, at the behest of a team of General Counsel's Office (GCO) attorneys and with the endorsement of Louise Parent, executive vice president and general counsel, the American Express Travel Related Services Company, Inc. (American Express) GCO developed a formal pro bono program for its legal department staff. The department sought to formalize a program in order to expand the pro bono efforts of American Express's attorneys and staff and to support the company's overall corporate social responsibility efforts. The GCO advanced the program from concept to implementation in less than a year.

American Express's program is led by a pro bono committee of approximately 12 members, comprised of a diverse group of attorneys, paralegals, and other staff members from the GCO. Committee positions do not have term limits, but new co-chairs are named every couple of years. The committee developed an official pro bono policy, which defines pro bono as "legal work for those who cannot afford it," including any training required to perform pro bono, as well as any volunteer work performed for an official pro bono partner organization. The policy does not mandate pro bono, though it is a consideration during performance reviews.

The pro bono committee disseminates information about pro bono opportunities through presentations at GCO meetings, regular emails, and the GCO intranet site. Louise Parent demonstrates her support for the program by attending pro bono promotional events with the department's partner organizations. She also presents an award at the GCO's yearly pro bono reception to those members of the legal department who have performed pro bono in the past year. The GCO group that performs the most pro bono in a given year also receives special recognition.

Pro Bono Work

The American Express GCO has been instrumental in the success of the New York City Bar Justice Center's Neighborhood Entrepreneur Law Project (NELP), an initiative that provides financial advice to low-income micro-entrepreneurs. The American Express Foundation provided the seed money for NELP and, in support of the company's larger CSR efforts, attorneys from the GCO volunteer their time and legal expertise by teaching NELP financial literacy courses. Courses cover a wide range of topics including banking and accounting basics, developing spending plans, and understanding credit.

In addition to its work with NELP, American Express attorneys also staff monthly clinics through the Workshop in Business Opportunities (WIBO) program. This program provides training to small business owners from under-served communities. During WIBO clinics, GCO

attorneys provide legal presentations and teach courses to small business owners in partnership with attorneys from the law firm of Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP.

Beyond these formal partnerships, American Express also sustains relationships with official pro bono partner organizations, providing opportunities for GCO attorneys to pursue direct pro bono representation for organizations approved by the Pro Bono Committee. This arrangement allows attorneys to pursue their passion and seek out pro bono projects that match their interests. American Express attorneys are able to work in partnership with attorneys from other law firms on individual matters when additional expertise and support may be useful.

Lessons Learned

- Partnering provides important support for in-house attorneys. It helps address concerns about lack of expertise in certain pro bono matters.
- For some attorneys, time constraints present the biggest obstacles to doing pro bono. One way to mitigate this issue is to offer shorter-term pro bono engagements like one-time clinics for which continued representation is not required.
- Legal departments can add value and breadth to a company's CSR profile by engaging in pro bono that supports the company's larger community efforts. By doing so, volunteers gain a deeper sense of connection to the company as a whole.
- Engaging in pro bono work can effectively address concerns about work place isolation. It allows volunteers to make connections and work with those in their department or company with whom they normally do not interact. It also helps to build relationships with those in the community.
- Sustaining attorney participation in pro bono efforts can be more challenging than initial implementation. Care and attention need to be paid to maintaining momentum and engagement.

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