



GENERAL MOTORS COMPANY BEST PRACTICES IN PRO BONO

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Pro Bono Contact: Steve Cernak, Chair, General Motors Pro Bono Committee

Program Background

The General Motors Company (GM) legal department, which is comprised of 180 lawyers located in Detroit and several offices abroad, first implemented a pro bono program in the late 1990s. Prior to that time, GM lawyers had been engaged in pro bono work, but when former general counsel Thomas Gottschalk joined the company, he formalized the program. Upon implementing a formal program, the department began offering regular pro bono opportunities for volunteers in lieu of one-off case referrals. Historically, GM's pro bono program has benefitted from the support and participation of senior management, which continues today under the leadership of Senior Vice President and General Counsel Michael Millikin.

Despite the recent economic downturn, which has forced the department to scrutinize each dollar spent on pro bono and deal with reduced staffing, GM's lawyers see tremendous value in pro bono. The pro bono coordinator, Steve Cernak, remarked that pro bono gives members of the legal department the opportunity to interact with a wide range of people in the community. He also said that pro bono "makes us feel more like lawyers, not just managers who happen to be experts in the law."

Program Infrastructure

GM's pro bono policy permits members of the legal department to undertake pro bono work on company time and stipulates that the company will cover incidental costs for pro bono work. Pro bono participation is voluntary for members of the legal department. GM's pro bono coordinator and a legal assistant oversee the administration of the program in addition to their other assignments. The pro bono coordinator reports that the most challenging aspect of sustaining a pro bono program is maintaining equal supply and demand of pro bono work for members of legal department. Most surprising has been the lack of sophistication of clients' legal matters. This can be frustrating, but it also means that any legal assistance provided is tremendously helpful.

GM tracks pro bono participation through a quarterly survey distributed to both lawyers and non-lawyers. As a signatory to the Corporate Pro Bono ChallengeSM, the legal department aspires to 50 percent participation and, in selecting outside counsel, the department inquires as to a firm's pro bono work. GM often partners with its outside counsel to undertake pro bono projects.

The pro bono coordinator disseminates information about pro bono opportunities via email as well as through an intranet site. Pro bono work is recognized at various department-wide meetings and via the intranet site.

Pro Bono Projects

Detroit Legal Services Clinic

The Detroit Legal Services Clinic (DLSC) was created in 1997 through the joint efforts of the offices of the general counsel for Ford Motor Company** and General Motors. The premise was simple: offer attorneys an opportunity to interact directly with a pro bono client and provide that attorney with the support, internally and externally, to adequately represent that client. On an annual basis, the GM legal department participates in DLSC events to handle a variety of matters, with a focus on drafting wills.

Community Legal Resources

Community Legal Resources (CLR) supports and empowers community organizations in Michigan that serve low-income individuals and communities, with an emphasis on community economic development, by providing pro bono legal services and technical assistance. In partnership with CLR and Dykema Gossett PLLC*, GM offers legal audits for local community development organizations. Lawyers also provide document review for those organizations. GM also accepts referrals from CLR, serving as general counsel to a CLR client organization.

Detroit Legal Aid and Defenders

GM's legal department staffs a monthly pro se divorce clinic. In partnership with Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association and Cooley Law School, GM takes on cases referred by Detroit Legal Aid and Defenders, and includes a Cooley student as part of the team. In partnership with Dykema Gossett, GM lawyers review the written policies of a local public housing authority. GM lawyers have also periodically handled immigration matters for Legal Aid and Defender clients.

Lessons Learned and Practical Guidance

- A pro bono program must evolve and stay fresh. People's interests are constantly changing, and pro bono offerings must reflect the interests of volunteers.

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