



Connecticut Hosts a Pro Bono Summit

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On October 5, Connecticut joined the growing list of states to host a pro bono summit (covered here by the [Connecticut Law Tribune](#)). Organized by Hon. William H. Bright, Jr. and the Connecticut Access to Justice Committee, the invitation-only summit brought together select members of Connecticut's legal community with the ability to make significant change to the state's pro bono culture and services, including Connecticut Supreme Court Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers, who conceived of the summit, numerous chief administrative justices, and leaders of law firms and legal departments. The message of the summit was threefold: there is a severe and worsening crisis in access to justice; all members of the Connecticut legal community must respond creatively and in concert to address the crisis; and top members of Connecticut's judiciary are committed to support and enable pro bono throughout the state. It was a call to action to do more, be better, and think bigger to maximize the impact of pro bono efforts by using collaborations, transitioning pro bono from "retail to wholesale" by creating projects that address particular issues on a wide scale, and focusing work on where the clients are – courts, schools, hospitals, and other institutions.

Chief Justice Rogers laid out the crisis in simple terms, citing the dire statistics regarding self-representation, which not only result in poor outcomes for the litigants but also gravely handicap the courts. Sheila Hayre from New Haven Legal Assistance reported that 300,000 people in Connecticut are at or below the poverty line, low-income households face nearly four civil legal situations a year, and legal services in the state can only handle 20,000 cases a year; all of which are indicative of an incredible shortfall in available assistance. PBI President and CEO Esther F. Lardent spoke about the nationwide "perfect storm of awfulness" in access to justice, resulting from an increase in demand from those in need and a reduction in resources for courts and legal services.

As was evident from the many speakers and attendees at the summit, it is not that the Connecticut legal community is a stranger to pro bono; many attorneys volunteer their time. Among others, friends of PBI and CPBO Brackett B. Denniston III, senior vice-president and general counsel of **General Electric Company****; Michael Kelly, managing partner of **McCarter & English, LLP***; Ellen Rosenthal, vice president and assistant general counsel of **Pfizer Inc.****; John Lynch, managing partner of **Robinson & Cole LLP***; and Charles Gill, senior vice president and general counsel of UTC, participated in a panel and discussed their pro bono programs. They also addressed ways in which Connecticut can make it easier for attorneys to participate, including revising the practice rules to enable and empower all attorneys, including in-house attorneys to provide pro bono services.

Three chief administrative judges spoke about their experiences with pro se litigants and ways in which the judicial branch can help with pro bono efforts to address the issue. Attendees also heard from legal service providers who explained their efforts to address what Lardent referred

to as the “chasm” in access to justice and the opportunities for attorneys to work with their organizations. These participants made it clear that the interest to provide pro bono is there, but the current efforts fall short given the extent of the need.

The Pro Bono Summit was an important step for Connecticut to take in order to make the necessary transformative changes. Information was exchanged, new ideas were suggested, new models and roles proposed, and attendees were inspired. In addition, a new resource, the [Connecticut Pro Bono Portal](#), was unveiled. The site serves as a central repository to introduce volunteer attorneys to pro bono opportunities. However, as Judge Bright and Governor Dannel Malloy said at the conclusion, the work has just begun. PBI and CPBO applaud Connecticut for taking a hard look at how to improve access to justice through pro bono and look forward to reporting on Connecticut’s progress.

In the meantime, individual law firms and legal departments are already taking the new charge to heart. While in Connecticut, CPBO met with Barbara Hennessey, pro bono coordinator at **Aetna, Inc.****, to discuss how the oldest in-house pro bono program with nearly 100 percent participation among the attorneys in its legal department can ensure that it is making the most impact. Across town, the Law Firm Project met first with Ed Heath, chair of the pro bono committee at **Robinson & Cole*** and then with Helen Harris, chair of the pro bono committee and Rick Harris at **Day Pitney***. Discussions at both meetings centered on how to effectively institutionalize pro bono at the respective firms.

If you work at a law firm or legal department and would like to discuss your pro bono efforts or organize a pro bono summit in your jurisdiction, [contact PBI](#).

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