



The Importance of Legal Services Corporation's Pro Bono Innovation Fund Grant

By Shannon Lucas, Director of Advocacy,¹ Sarah Munro, Pro Bono Department Manager,² Caroline Laman, Pro Bono Administrator,³ Michigan Advocacy Program

Introduction

In 2019, the Michigan Advocacy Program (MAP) applied for and was grateful to receive a Transformation Grant through the Legal Services Corporation's



Sarah Munro (Top Left); Shannon Lucas (Top Right); Caroline Laman (Lower Left).

(LSC's) Pro Bono Innovation Fund (PBIF). MAP is a larger legal services program in South Central Michigan and had struggled to implement a successful pro bono program across all of its field offices. Some of these offices are located in more urban areas like Lansing and Ann Arbor, but some require thoughtful outreach in rural areas with very small private attorney presence. The goal of the grant was to transform MAP's pro bono program into a modern, high-impact model providing increased access to justice for low-income community members. The grant allowed for the creation of a pro bono department, which includes Sarah Munro, Pro Bono Manager, and Caroline Laman, Pro Bono Administrator. MAP chose Shannon Lucas, the Director of Advocacy, to work closely with the team as a conduit to the LSC field offices.

In this article, the pro bono team sits down with the Director of Advocacy to discuss the work of the grant, their successes, and how this funding created more opportunity to grow the pro bono program.

Shannon: Hi Sarah and Caroline! I just reviewed your final report for our PBIF Transformation Grant and think it would be great to share some of the information with MIE. Could we start with why you decided to take on this project at MAP?

Sarah: I started practicing law in 2006 and have spent my entire career in public interest. I have been at MAP for over ten years. I started as a staff attorney in one of MAP's field offices and then helped launch and run a Medical Legal Partnership (MLP). During my time with the MLP, I realized how much I enjoyed starting, implementing, and managing new projects, particularly when they enable more of our client population to access justice.

Caroline: I came to the team a little differently. I have a background in psychology and social work, primarily working with children and young people. I had never worked in the legal sector prior to this position, but I knew immediately that the pro bono program would be a great fit for my skills and interests. Having previously worked with vulnerable populations in under-resourced areas doing volunteer coordination, I understood the importance of utilizing volunteers to expand a non-profit's client reach. I could see that MAP already had an incredible impact on communities needing legal support in Michigan and that this program would only help to further its mission. Also, I knew that starting this new pro bono project would give us the opportunity to create a program that truly fit the needs of both MAP and its clients.

Shannon: How did you begin your work?

Sarah: Prior to the receipt of this Transformation Grant, MAP did not have a pro bono department or any staff member who was solely devoted to pro bono development. Consequently, our goal and objectives from the onset were quite broad. We started by conducting an assessment of MAP's existing pro bono activities. Given the fact that MAP has six direct service offices (i.e., five Legal Services of South Central Michigan and one Farmworkers Legal Services office), each with its own Managing Attorney and priorities, this was especially important because there was a wide variety of approaches to pro bono placement and activities throughout the offices. Our assessment consisted of an all-staff survey aimed at understanding attitudes towards pro bono work across MAP. In addition, we conducted information gathering meetings with each field office's management and pro bono-responsible people to understand their existing pro bono practices. Further, we met with existing large firm, corporate counsel and law school partners to gain an understanding of their relationships with MAP and brainstorm ways to engage their staff/students. Importantly, we also met with other legal services organizations who had used PBIF grants to develop a new pro bono program.

Shannon: Let's dig a little deeper into those things. What did you do that was successful and that will be continued at MAP?

Caroline: After we conducted our assessments to understand staff attitudes, office practices and perspectives of pro bono partners, we decided to start a project so that we could begin developing pro bono case handling processes. We recognized the need for the implementation of pro bono standards and believed that the best way to develop the standards was through actually handling some cases and placing them with pro bono attorneys who we trained and supported. In addition, we felt that if we could start successfully placing cases and recruiting more pro bono volunteers, we would prove pro bono's worth to staff members who may have had negative past pro bono experiences and even lighten the field offices' caseloads.

Sarah: In addition to starting a case handling project, we started regular pro bono meetings, which include both the pro bono responsible staff and managing attorneys from each office, as a strategy to encourage pro bono integration throughout MAP. The integration of pro bono into various regular meetings

has also been a success, which we plan to continue. For example, I attend the MAP Manager meetings, where I deliver pro bono updates. Significantly, the executive director's consistent support of pro bono and your (Shannon, the Director of Advocacy) involvement in weekly pro bono team meetings has also resulted in greater program wide pro bono integration. Further, pro bono is introduced to new hires in their first onboarding meeting (usually within the first few days of employment) through our video introduction, thereby acknowledging the importance of pro bono from day one. Moreover, pro bono is now part of our Board Ambassador Training for all MAP Board Members.

Significantly, we hired a consultant to help us develop a Pro Bono Strategic Plan, which guided our work throughout the grant period and has continued to do so even after the completion of the grant. Through working closely with the consultant in the assessment and development of a strategic plan, we identified the need for tools to evaluate the effectiveness of our projects. Accordingly, we worked with another consultant to create quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the effectiveness of various projects, which we have continued to apply to new projects.

Caroline: As we obtained a better understanding of the ways each office handled pro bono through our assessment, we recognized that the field office staff are in a better position to build and maintain relationships with attorneys in their service areas. On the other hand, we realized that central pro bono staff is better positioned to develop relationships with large firms, corporate counsel, the state bar and law schools, on which we have focused our efforts. In addition, we recognized the importance of a centralized, consistent approach to recruiting attorneys and welcoming them to our office. As such, we updated our online Pro Bono Interest Form, and created a process for reaching out to and welcoming newly interested attorneys almost immediately after they express interest in our program. We also created a bi-weekly newsletter where local offices could advertise their available cases to firm attorneys and attorneys with whom they might not have a local connection. The cases that are included in the Pro Bono newsletter are also "pushed" to our online pro bono portal and appear on our page, which is accessible to attorneys registered with MAP.

The various centralized pro bono projects that we have launched since we started have been the best tool for new volunteer recruitment. For example, when

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we launched our Expungement Project, we recruited many volunteers who were new to our program, but who attended our Statewide Pro Bono Expungement Training, were interested in the subject area, and were attracted by the fact that we offered training and support in our placed cases. In addition, our frequent expungement clinics attracted law students and attorneys to events, and in some cases resulted in continued pro bono contributions subsequent to clinics. We also applied for and received a PBIF Project Grant, which enabled us to create a Legal Navigator program for expungement clients. Further, we created other central projects for free financial planning from certified planners, paralegal assistance completing SSA applications, family law clinics, and driver's license restoration clinics. Each of these projects resulted in service to many additional clients, most of whom have legal problems outside of the local field office staff priorities.

Shannon: Do you want to discuss any other major victories?

Caroline: Our pro bono transformation led to a number of victories. Significantly, the attitude toward pro bono within MAP has changed since we started our program. Pro bono is now treated with more seriousness and respect than it was prior to our transformation. Because the offices are able to send us cases and see that our projects obtain results for the clients, we prove to the staff that pro bono can result in good outcomes for clients and less work for the field offices. Our large projects attracted new pro bono volunteers, who we then introduce to various field offices for future pro bono placements. The staff has seen a dramatic increase in pro bono cases and volunteers. In addition, we have conducted pro bono clinics in all of our field offices' service areas, which demonstrated to the field offices that successful clinics are possible in their areas. We also offered to support field offices as they begin to plan their own clinics, separate from central pro bono. Further, all field offices identified pro bono goals, which allows individual offices to tailor their pro bono work to the specific needs of their clients and the realities of their volunteers. Now that we have centralized pro bono staff, there is a unified approach to pro bono work.

During our grant period, MAP transitioned its case management systems from PIKA to Justice Server,

which is a substantial technological improvement. A component of Justice Server on which we have been and remain focused is the Pro Bono Portal, which allows pro bono volunteers to access individual cases in Justice Server and make case notes/time entries. The use of the portal has resulted in a reduction of internal administrative time spent placing cases.

Importantly, we have worked since the implementation of Justice Server to develop new pro bono policies and procedures that allow for a unified and efficient approach to pro bono within our program. We developed a Pro Bono Manual, which is posted on the pro bono page of our internal website and provides staff with those policies and procedures. We also worked to update our pro bono page on our internal staff site so that it reflects current policies and practices.

The development of new projects also resulted in new relationships with outside organizations and entities. These partnerships enabled us to better advocate for our clients and address policy issues. In addition, the new partnerships resulted in additional funding opportunities.

Shannon: Do you think any of this work could be replicated by other programs?

Sarah: Many of our accomplishments are replicable. Many legal service organizations cover numerous counties and need to devise strategies to integrate pro bono throughout their programs. Our method of developing standard policies and procedures that apply program wide, but rely on individual field offices to manage individual case placement with local attorneys, is worth considering for similarly organized programs. Requiring that each office have a pro bono responsible person in addition to a pro bono responsible managing or supervising attorney, implementing regular meetings with the pro bono responsible people, and working with the offices to set pro bono goals are all replicable strategies, which we would recommend.

Another replicable accomplishment was the creation of a pro bono specific strategic plan. The newly developed pro bono strategic plan at MAP not only helped to clarify and situate pro bono into our overall program goals, but also greatly increased our ability to create cohesion across our field offices. It helped to set pro bono expectations for our field offices and aided in the buy-in from those offices to develop a unified approach to pro bono. Even though the pro bono strategic plan developed by MAP was created with our specific needs in mind, the creation of a pro

bono strategic plan can, and should, be tailored to the needs of any pro bono program. The creation of this plan offered us the opportunity to get feedback from staff in our field offices, clients, and other stakeholders so that we could best understand their perspectives on pro bono and work to meet their needs. Our office was able to contract with an outside consultant to complete this project. While we would recommend the use of an outside consultant to develop a strategic plan, we believe that this plan development could be done without the aid of a consultant. Developing clarity around program goals, both short and long term, is an incredibly important step to improving any pro bono program and we recommend it as a starting place for organizations looking to make improvements to their existing models.

Over the last year, the pro bono program developed and launched a Legal Navigator Program. This program utilizes the skills of non-attorney volunteers to assist expungement program participants at a variety of stages in the set aside process. They assist clients with document gathering, notarization, and hearing preparation, and are integral to clients obtaining their expungements. Due to staffing limitations, our office is only able to provide minimal support in the above listed areas, but with the legal navigators, clients get effective and personalized support. By engaging non-attorney volunteers, we tapped into a new market of interested volunteers while also expanding our ability to assist expungement program clients. It is worth noting that, in addition to assisting our clients, these new volunteers are exposed to the barriers our client populations face and the long term impact of our criminal justice system on our society.

Caroline: This program is well suited for replicability because there are many individuals who are interested in volunteering in the legal sector that are not licensed attorneys. MAP has partnered with law schools, certified paralegal programs, and undergraduate programs to recruit volunteers. These types of programs exist across the country in many of the areas of other legal aid offices and are a vast resource of volunteers. Even though our legal navigators are only currently working on our expungement program, we believe that the model for incorporating non-attorney volunteers can be applied to a myriad of other practice areas. This non-attorney model is particularly suited to areas that require a large number of administrative steps that must be handled by clients. Through the engagement of volunteers, this model can assist

with client retention throughout processes with a high administrative burden because the navigators are able to offer ongoing support that many of our internal staff do not have the capacity to provide. As the landscape and number of available attorneys changes, we see a growing need to engage non-attorney volunteers to assist legal aid clients. Through the identification of non-attorney programs and communities suited to support our specific client populations (i.e., social work programs, paralegal programs, law schools, etc.), this program model can be used by other LSC grantees to increase client retention and access to services. We would recommend this model to other legal services organizations.

Shannon: What were the biggest challenges during the life of this grant, and how did you address them?

Caroline: Overall, the implementation of the PBIF Grant project has gone quite smoothly, but that does not mean it came without challenges. One of the biggest hurdles at the onset of this project was the COVID pandemic. When we began, our offices were almost entirely remote, making it difficult to engage with clients, prospective volunteers, and staff. It meant that all inventory meetings with staff were conducted remotely, which affected our ability to create buy-in across the organization. However, with our positions being created specifically from this grant funding, it meant that we were able to take things at a slower pace and take the time necessary to understand the existing internal and external pro bono systems. We (Sarah and Caroline) were able to speak with staff and community partners about their views on pro bono, which put us in a better position to make cohesive and community directed changes to the existing systems. In addition, the pandemic and the related staffing issues resulted in a pro bono strategy that relies on each office's expertise handling their local pro bono case placement and panels. Instead of imposing new processes on the offices in a time of overwhelming caseloads, we focused instead on developing program-wide projects, which were intended to serve their clients, lighten their workloads, and demonstrate the value of pro bono work.

Another challenge was the lack of staffing and staff turnover that resulted in the need for us (Sarah and Caroline) to take on larger caseloads than anticipated, which in turn distracted from the overarching programmatic work required of this grant. At the onset of the grant period, we were the only two staff members

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in the pro bono department. To avoid overwhelming field office staff with new pro bono programs, we chose to create projects in legal areas for which the field offices did not have capacity, specifically expungements. While this allowed us to prove to the field offices the importance and benefits of the pro bono department, it meant that our work was largely focused on running the expungement program. It was not until we were able to hire two staff expungement attorneys and an expungement paralegal that we were able to take a step back from casework and begin to conceptualize further programmatic initiatives for pro bono.

Sarah: Throughout this process, we have been fortunate to have the expertise of our LSC PBIF Program Counsel, Mytrang Nguyen. Mytrang's vast pro bono experience and knowledge helped us navigate any challenge we encountered, and her support was unwavering. In addition, the PBIF's programing, which include trainings and opportunities for connection and networking with other grantees, provided further tools and resources for addressing challenges.

As the expungement program has continued and leadership among the staff attorneys has increased, we have again been able to return to a more directed focus on program development. These types of setbacks showed us how to manage our programs and what type of team and procedures we need in place to best manage the pro bono department. While it was, at times, demanding to manage the fluctuation in our work, these challenges were a learning opportunity and reflected the natural ebb and flow of the organization as a whole. We are now better equipped to contend with these types of challenges going forward.

Shannon: Any additional lessons or recommendations?

Sarah: Our PBIF Transformation Grant resulted in a number of lessons learned. Perhaps most importantly, we learned that the old pro bono model of case-by-case placement is not an efficient way to achieve our goal of a high impact program. Accordingly, we created a model where individual field offices can place individual cases using the old model and maintain their local pro bono attorney relationships, but where we develop centralized projects that are aimed at impacting more clients, attracting and training volunteers on

a larger scale, and providing support and oversight to ensure that our clients receive quality legal assistance and representation.

In addition to lessons regarding efficiency and structure, we learned the importance of gaining the support of internal staff. We also learned that some effective strategies to gaining that support include creating successful centralized pro bono projects, relying on pro bono responsible staff in field offices, instituting regular meetings of pro bono responsible staff program wide, including pro bono updates in management meetings, introducing our pro bono program as part of onboarding for all new staff, and collaborating closely with the director of advocacy and the executive director so that pro bono is integrated throughout the organization.

Further, we learned the importance of including pro bono in MAP's Strategic Plan, and creating a strategic plan that is specific to our pro bono program. As discussed, the strategic plan guided our work throughout the grant period and continues to do so. The information gathering of the consultant and her perspective as an outsider were incredibly helpful in the development of the priorities and goals contained in the Plan.

Caroline: With respect to the development and administration of new projects, we learned the importance of planning by first identifying client needs, looking to other successful projects' best practices, creating partnerships and building relationships, strategizing around recruitment and retention of volunteers, and creating systems for thorough training, support, and oversight.

Our recommendations include taking time to assess the existing pro bono activity in a program before starting new projects or developing any policies/procedures, carving out a subject area to start developing a project around (ideally, one that field offices are not handling), introducing new projects slowly to allow for the early identification of problems, developing a clear plan that includes priorities, goals, and objectives, and working to integrate pro bono into the program with a special focus on obtaining staff support.

1 Shannon Lucas is the Director of Advocacy at the Michigan Advocacy Program where she oversees the program's six Legal Services Corporation field offices. Prior to this role, Shannon served as the Managing Attorney in the Monroe Office of Legal Services of South Central Michigan. Shannon may be reached at lucass@lsscm.org.