

The next generation of lawyers can help the most vulnerable in society

By Alex Chalk MP , Solicitor General for England and Wales

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From taking on FRU (Free Representation Unit) work as a bar student, to chairing the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pro Bono as an MP 15 years later, I have seen with my own eyes over many years the enormous value of pro bono and public legal education.

Neither is a substitute for a properly resourced legal aid system of course, but both can significantly enhance support for the most vulnerable in society – not only to secure access to justice, but also to help citizens understand their rights and the services available to them.

Law students in our country soon discover that their chosen field is more than a mere career. The pro bono statistics bear out the profound sense of vocation that many lawyers rightly feel. Every year, solicitors and barristers devote thousands of hours free of charge to supporting individuals to better vindicate their rights. Every hour they spend reinforces both the foundations of the rule of law and the fundamental fairness of our society. As a Parliamentarian, I can see that these devoted lawyers breathe fresh life into statutory protections that might otherwise never deliver what our democratic institutions intended. At the same time, lawyers who work pro bono will also learn valuable skills that they can deploy in their paid work.

The attorney general and I are the government's pro bono champions, and as part of this chair a panel and committee to help steer and co-ordinate pro bono across England and Wales. Our vision is for a country where legal capability is spread throughout our society – where everyone, and every group, is able to identify legal issues and seek redress. It is a country where no-one, no community, and no section of society is denied justice through ignorance of their legal rights and responsibilities, or of the actions which they can take to protect them. Nor are they denied justice due to the inability to afford legal expertise.

This year, as we celebrate Pro Bono Week, in its 20th year, we have a chance to celebrate and recognise some of the extraordinary contributions lawyers make in giving free legal help to those in need.

Those contributions have been especially impressive in recent years. The legal community stepped up to support the many victims of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, with lawyers running free daily drop-in advice clinics, and often working throughout the weekends to help hundreds of people who needed immediate legal assistance.

In the same year nearly 200 firms, chambers and individuals offered to provide free legal advice to those affected by the Manchester Arena Bombing, following a call for help from the Manchester Law Society.

Most recently, lawyers had to take many of their services online during the pandemic, which came with a unique set of challenges. And yet, despite the hurdles and uncertainties, lawyers continued to volunteer their time and skill, and helped ensure that the most vulnerable in society continued to have access to justice throughout the pandemic.

Many lawyers first start their pro bono work while they are students and continue to deliver on that commitment during their professional career. Those students who provide pro bono advice to thousands of people every year deserve a special thanks.

I and the attorney general will continue offering support for pro bono, driving forward the great work that is already happening. And I encourage everyone in the legal profession, despite the myriad professional pressures I know they face, to think about how they can make their contribution.

As we reflect on the last 20 years, let us recommit to an excellent pro bono service for many years to come.