

Videotaped Introduction to Pro Bono Scholars Seminar – 850 Words

Welcome to today's seminar for Pro Bono Scholars. At the outset, I want to congratulate you on completing the bar exam. Now that you have been through that rite of passage, I hope that you are looking forward to the next phase of your legal education with enthusiasm. You should be very proud to be among the first group of Pro Bono Scholars. I am so pleased that you have chosen to devote your last semester of law school to making a real and lasting impact on the lives of New Yorkers in need.

The work you will be doing for twelve weeks this semester is part of larger movement to close the justice gap between the finite legal resources available and the desperate need for legal services for the poor and people of modest means. New York, like the rest of the country, faces an on-going crisis in access to justice. In recent years, more than 2 million people annually have come into our court system without a lawyer or the funds to hire one. Many of these people are facing the loss of life's basic necessities – they are fighting to keep a roof over their heads, fighting to keep their children, fighting to keep their sources of income and healthcare. Our courts have truly become the emergency rooms for society's worst ailments - substance abuse, family violence, mental illness, mortgage foreclosures, and so much more. People in crisis will not be able to assert their legal rights effectively if they do not have the assistance of a lawyer.

The impact of a lack of legal representation extends well beyond the unrepresented: more time is required of judges and court staff to deal with unrepresented litigants, adjournments are much more frequent, and opposing parties represented by counsel (like landlords, banks, and

businesses) have higher litigation and other costs. As a result, the courts become less efficient, and the quality of justice for every New Yorker suffers.

As Pro Bono Scholars, you will help to solve this problem. You will be sharing what you have learned over the past two and a half years to improve the quality of justice in your communities. Your help will make a difference in the lives of vulnerable people. At the same time, you will be applying what you have learned in law school to a real-world context. The hands-on experience you will get as a Pro Bono Scholar will help prepare you for the realities of practice once you graduate. And your placement will give you opportunities to build your professional reputation and your relationships with practicing lawyers.

As you embark on your work this semester, you are not alone. New York has taken a comprehensive and systematic approach to confronting the crisis in delivering legal services to the poor and the disadvantaged. We have been successful in New York in providing substantial government funding for civil legal services through the judiciary budget. That funding, first introduced in 2010, has grown to a total of \$70 million this year, the most anywhere in the country. That support for civil legal service providers has allowed us to reach many thousands of litigants in need. Programs like Pro Bono Scholars and the 50-hour pro bono requirement for bar admission increase available assistance to low-income litigants and shine a light on the need for that assistance.

We laid the ground-work for change through the Task Force to Expand Access to Civil Legal Services in New York, which was established in 2009. The Task Force plays a critical role in measuring the extent of the problem and recommending solutions. In addition, we hold four hearings around the state each year to hear from judges, legal

service providers, business and religious leaders, advocates, and elected officials on the need for legal services for the poor, and from litigants themselves, whose lives were turned around when they found a legal service provider to represent them. The testimony at these hearings has helped in developing a road map for effective reform.

Pro bono work by the bar plays a key role in meeting the need for legal assistance for the poor. In a few short months, you will be entering a profession with a long and noble tradition of service to others. With our monopoly on the practice of law comes a responsibility to ensure that justice is served. Lawyers must understand their professional and ethical obligation to perform pro bono work on behalf of those in need who otherwise will have no access to the courts or to other legal services. I hope that you will take with you from the Pro Bono Scholars program a sense of the good that you can do as a lawyer and the personal and professional fulfillment that comes from helping others. Whatever you choose to do with your law degree, whatever kind of practice you develop, I hope that you will continue to make service to others a vital part of your professional life.

Best of luck in your work this spring, and I wish you great success in your careers ahead.