**Opinion-Editorial: the role of lawyers is no laughing matter**

*Note: This column was written in recognition of National Pro Bono Week, Oct. 22-28*

**Dean R. Dietrich, president, State Bar of Wisconsin**

Q. What’s the difference between a bad lawyer and a good lawyer?

A. A bad lawyer makes your case drag on for years. A good lawyer makes it last even longer.

We’ve all heard lawyer jokes. In fact, they pre-date Shakespeare’s era. We find humor until we find ourselves in need of one. The assistance of a lawyer is crucial for major life events, such as divorce, adoption, purchasing real estate, death, crime, serious accidents, starting a business, and bankruptcy.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2020, a significant portion of our residents - 11.8% - lived below the poverty line. These individuals lack the financial resources to secure legal representation when they encounter legal issues. Pro Bono services help bridge this gap, ensuring everyone has a fair chance in the legal system.

**Defining Pro Bono**

Pro bono is a Latin phrase meaning “for the public good.” Pro bono work involves legal services provided free of charge or at a reduced fee to individuals and organizations in need. It’s the legal profession’s commitment to ensuring access to justice for all, regardless of financial means.

**Strengthening Communities**

Beyond individual cases, pro bono work has a ripple effect that strengthens communities across Wisconsin for families with limited resources. Those who are less fortunate such as children, domestic and sexual violence survivors, the elderly, homeless, immigrants, people with disabilities, veterans, and workers all benefit from pro bono work completed by lawyers.

**The Legal Profession’s Commitment**

In 2022, 298 Wisconsin lawyers voluntarily committed a minimum of 50 hours of their time – 14,800 hours in total – to the tune of $3.7 million in value.

Yet we also know there are unmet legal needs in the Badger State, and we are encouraging lawyers and law students this week – National Pro Bono Week – to volunteer their time. Volunteering perpetuates a cycle of generosity and ensures that access to justice is not just a wish, it’s the cornerstone of our legal system.

**Where to Turn**

If you need legal assistance and you meet income qualifications, there are a number of resources available to you:

* The [State Bar of Wisconsin](file:///\\net.wisbar.org\shares\Depts\Comm\Comm\Public%20Relations\AAAMedia\2023%20Media\2023%20Guest%20Editorial\wisbar.org\forPublic\INeedaLawyer\Pages\Reduced-Fee-Services.aspx.) offers a number of free and reduced fee legal services.
* [Wisconsin Free Legal Answers](file:///\\net.wisbar.org\shares\Depts\Comm\Comm\Public%20Relations\AAAMedia\2023%20Media\2023%20Guest%20Editorial\wi.freelegalanswers.org) is a virtual legal advice clinic for civil (noncriminal) legal questions at no cost.
* The [Wisconsin State Law Library](file:///\\net.wisbar.org\shares\Depts\Comm\Comm\Public%20Relations\AAAMedia\2023%20Media\2023%20Guest%20Editorial\wilawlibrary.gov\topics\assist.php) offers an extensive listing of legal resources by county.

**Conclusion**

Lawyer jokes may evoke laughter, but the role of lawyers in our lives is no laughing matter. When life-altering events require legal expertise, we depend on lawyers to guide us through complex and challenging situations. Pro Bono work bridges the gap and ensures that every person in our diverse community has a fair shot in the legal system.

During Pro Bono Week, Oct. 22-28, let’s recognize and thank lawyers who champion pro bono work to ensure justice for all.

*Dean R. Dietrich is president of the State Bar of Wisconsin. He is with the law firm of Weld Riley S.C., Wausau.*