



# Washington College of Law Office of Public Interest

## Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program Frequently Asked Questions

### BASIC INFORMATION

**Q: What is the Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program?**

**A:** Washington College of Law was founded on the principle of advancing the causes of low-income and underrepresented people. The Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program furthers this goal by recognizing the voluntary, uncompensated work on behalf of low-income and underrepresented populations undertaken by WCL students while at the law school. The program is also designed to encourage students to continue carrying out pro bono service in their careers as attorneys after graduation, and is a great way to get experience in a field in which you may be interested.

**Q. What kind of work will I be doing through the Pledge?**

**A.** Students can work on issues of their choosing at organizations of their choosing, provided the project fits the Pledge criteria. Pro Bono work gives students exposure to fields that interest them and allow them to practice legal skills such as client interviews, accompanying clients to court, fact investigation, legal research and drafting documents. Also, many organizations need students with foreign language proficiency to interpret or translate, so the Pledge is an excellent way to put your language skills to good use!

**Q: How do I Participate in the Pledge Program?**

**A:** Through the program, students pledge to complete a minimum of 75 hours of pro bono and community service projects at organizations working on behalf of low-income and underrepresented populations. At least 50 hours of the pro bono work completed must be with an organization engaged primarily in law-related or legal work. However, students may complete up to 25 of their 75 hours in non-legal community service work. This allows first year students to participate immediately.

LL.M. students who volunteer for the pledge must complete a minimum of 25 hours of law-related or legal work. Due to the special difficulty of non-U.S. LL.M.'s securing a traditional law-related pro bono placement, all 25 hours of their pledge may be completed in non-law related community service placements.

There are no negative consequences for students who do not meet their pledge.

**Q: I'm interested, what do I need to do now?**

**A: Fill Out the Pledge Agreement Form:** To participate in the Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program, students must turn in a Student Pledge Agreement form to the Office of Public Interest in Suite 122. If you need help getting started, the Public Interest Coordinator is available to meet with students to discuss their interests and available options.

**Q: Can I still pledge to participate in the Pro Bono Program if I am not a first-year student?**

**A:** All WCL students are welcome to register for the Pro Bono Honors Pledge at any time. All participants, except LL.Ms need to complete the full 75 hours. LL.M. students who volunteer for the pledge must complete a minimum of 25 hours of law-related or legal work. Due to the special difficulty of non-U.S. LL.M.s securing traditional law-related pro bono placement, all 25 hours of their pledge may be completed in non-law related community service placements. There are no negative consequences for students who do not meet their pledge.

**Q: What happens when I meet the Pledge?**

**A:** Students who complete the pledge prior to the end of their final year at WCL will be listed in the honors section of the graduation bulletin. They will also receive a certificate indicating the different level of honors based on the total number of hours completed: Honors (75-124 hours), Outstanding Service Honors (125-174 hours) and Exceptional Service Honors (175+ hours). Additionally, students will be recognized at a public service awards ceremony each spring. There are no negative consequences for students who do not meet their pledge.

## **VOLUNTEER PLACEMENT & RECORDKEEPING INFORMATION**

**Q: What type of work counts towards the Pro Bono Honors Pledge?**

**A: Community Service Placements:** Students fulfilling the community service portion of their pledge may volunteer with any nonprofit engaged in work on behalf of low-income or underrepresented people.

**Pro Bono Placements:** Students completing the pro bono portion of their pledge may volunteer with qualifying nonprofit organizations, government agencies or WCL Programs. A list of possible pro bono placements in the DC Metro Area is available online at <http://www.wcl.american.edu/publicinterest/probono.cfm>.

**Q: I would like to get started fulfilling hours towards my pledge, how can I find a placement that suits my interests?**

**A:** Several resources are available to help you select a pro bono placement. The Office of Public Interest maintains a list of suggested placements with brief descriptions of each organization and its work. There is also a binder of student evaluations describing their experience at various placements. The Public Interest Coordinator is available to meet with you on an individual basis to talk about your interests and suggest placements.

After you have identified possible placements, call or email the contact person at each placement to find out how to get started. Some may wish to meet you for an interview or interview you by phone. Others have well-established student pro bono programs with regularly scheduled orientations.

**Q: I am a second-year student who has not yet registered for the Pledge. Over the past year I have been doing a lot of volunteer work with a local organization. If I sign up now, can the pro bono work I have already done count towards the Pledge?**

**A:** Any qualifying pro bono or community service work carried out after the start of your first semester at WCL will count toward the Pledge provided that 1) it meets the criteria set out in the pledge materials (see summary below), and 2) you can obtain a supervisor's signature on the Student Time Log or Community Service Time Verification form attesting to your completion of the hours.

**Q: I am volunteering with a Clinical Program by translating documents for one of the clients. Does this work count toward the Pledge?**

**A:** The hours would count towards the pledge just as long as your work is benefiting underserved populations and you are not receiving any form of credit or compensation. For example, translating a document for a client would count while volunteering for clinic simulations would not.

**Q: What kind of government work counts toward the Pledge?**

**A:** Work with a government agency providing law-related assistance on behalf of low-income or underrepresented populations that is not for pay or academic credit. For example, working for the EEOC assisting individual employees with tort claims counts, while defending the U.S. government against individual tort claims does not (because the U.S. government is not an underserved population).

**Q: I am volunteering with a judge working on adoption and neglect cases – does this count towards the Pledge?**

**A:** Time spent assisting a judge with abuse and neglect cases counts toward the Pledge, provided it is not for pay or academic credit. Because the work is for the benefit of children in the abuse and neglect system, it clearly meets the criteria of being on behalf of an underserved population. However, time spent on assisting the judge with office administration would not be counted.

**Q: I am volunteering with VITA (Voluntary Income Tax Assistance). Does this work count toward the Pledge?**

**A:** Volunteering with VITA is a wonderful way to contribute hours towards the Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program. However, only the time spent working with clients is eligible to be counted, time spent in training does not count.

**Q: If I am working for a private firm as a summer intern will have the opportunity to work on a pro bono case, would this count towards the pledge?**

**A:** Students can receive Pro Bono Honors Pledge credit for pro bono cases at private law firms only under the following circumstances: 1) Neither the firm nor the student is receiving any pay for their work on the case, 2) the client is a member of an underserved population; and 3) the student is not receiving any academic credit for the work (e.g. an independent study or externship, etc.). If the student is otherwise receiving pay for working at the firm and wishes to take on pro bono work, the pro bono work will count towards the pledge only if the student works on the case outside of his or her normal working hours.

**Q: Does work for a faculty member or WCL program qualify towards the pro bono pledge?**

**A:** Yes, as long as the work is law-related on behalf of underprivileged or underrepresented populations, and is not for pay or academic credit. For example, time spent conducting research for a brief in support of petition for asylum is eligible for pro bono pledge credit. Projects not for the benefit of an underprivileged or underrepresented population (such as research or editing for a casebook) are ineligible for pro bono pledge credit.

**Q. Can I get Pro Bono or Community Service Hours for organizing a conference?**

**A.** Again, the answer is generally no. Although organizing conferences on public interest topics is certainly well worth doing and a wonderful way to network, it does not meet the requirement of being for the benefit of an underserved population.

However, if the conference has an actual public service project component, the time spent participating in the public service component may qualify for pro bono or community service hours, depending on the nature of the project.

**Q: What if I did pro bono work last year/summer but did not register for the Pledge or report the hours– is it too late?**

**A:** It is not too late to report the hours for Pledge credit. If you are a 2L or 3L student and have a supervisor who will sign your Student Time Log attesting to the hours and projects undertaken over the summer or during the past academic year, then the time reported is eligible for pledge credit.

Students are responsible for tracking and reporting their hours each semester. Although you will not be penalized for reporting them later, we encourage students to submit reported hours for each semester by the last day of classes. Students who have signed up for the pledge will be sent an email reminder from the Office of Public Interest as the end of the semester approaches. For community service placements, students must complete the Community Service Time Verification form, including the signature of a supervisor.

Student Time Logs and Community Service Time Verification forms are available online at <http://www.wcl.american.edu/publicinterest/probono.cfm> or in the Office of Public Interest.

**Q. Can I count work conducted with funding from an Equal Justice Foundation grant?**

**A.** Generally, the answer is no, because the grant constitutes financial remuneration for your work, BUT you may report unpaid hours towards your Pro Bono Honors Pledge, provided you were not receiving any other kind of compensation or academic credit. For example, if your EJF grant covers eight weeks of work, and you actually work for ten weeks, you can report the additional hours outside of the period covered by the grant for pro bono credit, provided it meets the pledge criteria (see below).

For community service placements (up to 25 hours), work with a nonprofit on behalf of a low-income or underrepresented population (first year students only).

For pro bono placements, (50 or more hours), work with a nonprofit organization, government agency or WCL program engaged primarily in law-related work on behalf of low-income or underrepresented populations that is not for pay or academic credit.

**Have a question you don't see answered here?  
Email your question to [publicinterest@wcl.american.edu](mailto:publicinterest@wcl.american.edu)  
or stop by the Office of Public Interest in Suite 122.**