

## Pro Bono – Law Firms

# Where Pro Bono Is Embedded In Firm Culture

The Editor interviews Steven A. Reiss, Partner and Chair of Weil Gotshal's Pro Bono Committee.

**Editor: With your many other commitments both in terms of your demanding career and time spent in public and community service, why were you willing to take on the time-consuming role of chair of Weil Gotshal's Pro Bono Committee?**

**Reiss:** I think there are very few things that are more important, and I continue to do it because I am pleased with the results. When Steve Dannhauser, our chairman, and the Management Committee asked me to become chair of the Pro Bono Committee, I agreed to do it on one condition – that we had the same goal for the pro bono area that we have for our other practices. I believe it is possible to be a great law firm without a top-tier pro bono program but it is not possible to be a great institution, which is what we aspire to. It is very important to me personally – and to the firm – that we inculcate a pro bono culture into the firm where everyone understands that it is the institution's view that pro bono is part of being a top professional.

**Editor: Please tell our readers about the firm's recently enacted pro bono policy.**

**Reiss:** We have committed this policy to writing so people understand just how serious our commitment is. The policy requires every entering lawyer, whether a first-year associate or a senior lateral partner, to take on a pro bono matter within their first two years with the firm. One of the things this does is to start them thinking from the time they walk in the door, "What pro bono matter am I going to take on?" It further engages them with our full-time pro bono staff from the time they come to the firm. We have a goal that every lawyer does at least 50 hours of pro bono work each year, which we make a hard requirement in the first two years. It so happens that last year, for example, we averaged about 85 hours of pro bono per lawyer, the equivalent of 43 full-time lawyers. The other important piece of the policy is that we have the expectation that every partner and counsel will take on or supervise a pro bono matter every year – a commitment that comes from the top down. And last year our track record was a heady 92-93 percent of partners who participated. The fact is that the policy is taken very seriously and it's really working.

**Editor: In 2005 we interviewed Miriam Buhl who became Pro Bono Counsel at Weil. Why was this office developed? How does your role interface with Miriam's job in the important effort to engage all your lawyers in pro bono service?**

**Reiss:** The one thing I will take unadulterated credit for is hiring Miriam – probably the single best thing I've done. When I took over the chairmanship of the committee, I looked at the resources the firm was devoting to pro bono work. I

likened our work to that of a foundation since we devote a huge amount of money and time to this effort. It needed a more strategic, coordinated approach. I decided to look for a very different person to head the full-time pro bono staff whose principal experience was as executive director of foundations. I wanted someone to do the kinds of things that I found I didn't have enough time to do: think strategically, think organizationally, think about where we can do the most good and get the most bang for our pro bono hours. And that is exactly what Miriam has done. She has been spectacularly good at organizational work in helping the committee and me think strategically about what to do and how to run the program. Miriam heads the full-time staff of four who run the pro bono department. They interface with the lawyers, help in selecting the cases, organize our relationships with charitable organizations, and perform the oversight of 85,000 hours of pro bono work a year. Miriam is the counterpart to a COO on the pro bono side, the Pro Bono Committee acts as the board, and I act as a kind of CEO. As a group we set strategic direction, make important policy decisions and make administration decisions if we think they involve significant dedication of resources. Miriam and I have weekly meetings. Miriam also coordinates firm-wide with all of our offices on behalf of the Pro Bono Committee. So it is a big operational task. We actually do more pro bono work than almost any fully dedicated legal service organization in the United States.

**Editor: I understand also that the firm has just risen to the number two spot in AmLaw's ranking of law firm performance, partly based on the firm's contributions to pro bono.**

**Reiss:** The firm has been in the AmLaw A-list for four of the last five years. Obviously the pro bono piece has been very important because it is weighted twice along with financial performance while diversity and associate satisfaction are each counted once.

**Editor: Who inspired the leaders of the firm to become so involved in pro bono in the firm's early beginnings?**

**Reiss:** The firm has always had a strong commitment to public service and pro bono. Our senior group, Ira Millstein and Todd Lang, have long been dedicated to philanthropic causes – Ira with the Central Park Conservancy (and a number of other matters), Todd with Human Rights First and Safe Horizon. We realized as the firm grew that we needed to organize and focus the commitment as well as make sure, as the firm expanded, that all the lawyers in the firm really understood the depth of the commitment. Steve Dannhauser, in his role as Chair, and the Management Committee have been enor-



Steven A. Reiss

mously helpful. Steve Dannhauser's own involvement with the Police and Fire Widows' and Children's Benefit Fund and Boys' and Girls' Harbor – all those things are critical because they serve as a model for all the lawyers. I remember a watershed meeting with the Management Committee where we said, "Look, we really need to figure out how to institutionalize the commitment that is coming from the very top," which was the genesis for the pro bono policy. So the commitment at the top is very strong, and I don't think you can possibly succeed on the institutional level without it.

**Editor: Describe how the firm has relied upon institutional relationships for channeling its lawyers' volunteer efforts.**

**Reiss:** Working with particular institutions that are operating in areas that we've committed to helps to steer our focus. For example, we have a very strong institutional relationship with Oxfam, which is probably the premier international poverty and disaster-relief organization in the world. The relationship had its genesis with our London office and has been adopted firm-wide. In the U.S. we have very close relationships with New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, Lawyers Alliance for New York ("LANY"), Legal Aid Society, Legal Services of New York, The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program, to name just a few. These relationships bring to us a constant stream of meaningful pro bono work as well as allow us to focus our efforts into areas we care about.

**Editor: How extensively are attorneys in your overseas offices drawn into the orbit of committing time to pro bono work?**

**Reiss:** It varies from office to office. The London office merits credit for setting a new tone throughout London for its level of pro bono service. That office's pro bono hours are comparable to any office in the United States. London itself has changed. Throughout the profession in London there is a growing pro bono culture. In other parts of continental Europe there are actually bar rules that make it more difficult to perform pro bono work outside institutional bar mechanisms. On the other hand, a number of bars in civil-law countries require lawyers to do the equivalent of pro bono work as a matter of course. Integrating those bar obligations with what I would call U.S.-style efforts with not-for-profits is something we're working through. And we're frankly taking the leadership role in countries such as Hungary and Poland.

**Editor: Please describe your program for indoctrinating incoming associates in the program.**

**Reiss:** Our program starts when second-year law students applying for summer associate positions interview for the first time. We publish an extensive pro bono annual review that summarizes our pro bono activity; they see that pro bono is a

big piece of what we do as part of our recruiting literature. Once they accept a summer associate position, they are told about all the pro bono opportunities during their summer associateship, including a large number of externships. When they are hired as full-time first-year associates, they know about the requirement that they take on a pro bono matter in their first two years; they meet the pro bono staff; they're constantly engaged. Even before they come as summer associates, they know that this is something the institution really cares about.

**Editor: Would you tell our readers about the externship program?**

**Reiss:** We have a number of externships where our associates are seconded for four month periods to work full time with various legal pro bono services organizations in New York. We always have a corporate associate as an extern at LANY which is a transactionally based pro bono services organization. We also have a litigation-based associate at Legal Services of New York at all times. In addition, we recently sent two externs to the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund. And we also have externships with the Corporation Counsel, which have also been quite successful. The externships are acknowledged as rewards for our best associates.

**Editor: Would you like to describe one or two of the anecdotal stories of Weil lawyers whose volunteer contributions have made a vital difference?**

**Reiss:** One such instance that has had an immediate impact on a large number of people is our litigation in connection with FEMA in New Orleans. Victims of Katrina were denied benefits after having received them. FEMA made the decision to cut them off, leaving them to rely on their appeal rights. Now the problem with that is (1) they probably should not have been cut off and (2) the appellate procedures to recover the FEMA benefits are so Byzantine that no one, not even lawyers, can understand them. These people were in really desperate straits who needed immediate relief. We led the effort by filing a class action suit challenging the procedures for curtailing benefits and sought a preliminary injunction. A federal judge in New Orleans granted our requested preliminary injunction word-for-word. It had the effect of recovering benefits for 10,000 people. One of the lawyers who participated said it was the best day he ever had in court, and I'd imagine that's true.

The stories that are most important are the ones that don't get publicity since they are about help for a single individual. We had a very tough asylum case involving an individual from the Dominican Republic. The administrative law judge, whom we did not think would be particularly sympathetic, decided to grant asylum. Those are the matters that I consider core pro bono work – the matters for individuals that are life-changing even if no one else besides the lawyers and the individual ever know about it.

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