

Vetting Worthy Pro Bono Projects

Equal Justice Works teams up with law departments and corporations to give back

Steve Fus, associate general counsel at United Airlines, and Averil Edwards, counsel for environmental health and safety at United, discuss the company's partnership with Andrew Hemmer, an Equal Justice Works fellow at Cabrini Green Legal Aid, and the law firm Seyfarth Shaw to provide pro bono legal representation to individuals who've had property seized as a result of an arrest.

What prompted United Airlines to get involved in pro-bono work? How long have you been involved in pro bono work as an organization?



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Steve Fus: Our EVP and general counsel, Brett Hart, asked me to start the program in 2012. It's based upon Brett's belief that a lawyer's responsibility, besides doing the work that we're hired to do, is also to give back to those in need in the communities that we work and operate in, specifically to those who cannot afford to hire a lawyer or otherwise do not have access to a lawyer.

What is Equal Justice Works, and how does the fellowship program work?

Andrew Hemmer: Equal Justice Works offers different fellowships, but their main one is a two-year private fellowship. The fellowships are sponsored by corporations, like United Airlines, as well as law firms, bar foundations and other organizations like that. Equal Justice Works connects public interest lawyers with sponsors, like United and Seyfarth Shaw. The selections are project based, so the public interest lawyer sees a need in a community, comes up with a project, and then finds a host organization, like Cabrini Green Legal Aid, that is willing to host the fellow for two years. Fellows submit applications to Equal Justice Works, which sends them to the sponsors, who pick what they like best.

What has United's perspective of working with Equal Justice Works been?

Averil Edwards: We became involved with Equal Justice Works a little over a year ago. We wanted to participate in the fellowship program, and we liked that we would have the opportunity to partner with a law firm to sponsor a fellow. We've had really good support from Seyfarth Shaw. They helped us identify very strong candidates and facilitated the interview process. They've also provided incredibly valuable suggestions and support on how to manage the project.

Fus: The ability to meet an unmet legal demand in a meaningful way in our community is very unique. It allows us to provide a solution to those who would otherwise be frustrated by their inability to have access to justice that many of us take for granted. In our first year, I found it extremely rewarding to help those in need. It has genuinely lived up to its potential.

Tell us about the Civil Asset Forfeiture Defense Project at Cabrini Green Legal Aid.

Hemmer: The Civil Asset Forfeiture Defense Project provides direct representation to individuals who've had property seized as a result of an arrest. We represent individuals in state civil asset forfeiture cases and city vehicle impoundment cases, and then attorneys from United Airlines and Seyfarth Shaw represent individuals in civil asset forfeiture cases on a pro bono basis. The typical scenario is somebody is pulled over with drugs in a relative's car and

the car is seized. The state tries to keep the car permanently, and we try to get that property back for the owner.

Fus: By and large, we've been representing automobile owners who have had no involvement or even knowledge of the activity associated with the seizure. The individuals who were arrested in connection with the seizure of the vehicle are not the owners of the vehicle and instead are frequently relatives of the owner.

Andrew, Cabrini Green Legal Aid is your host, and United Airlines and Seyfarth Shaw are your sponsors. How does this collaboration work?

Hemmer: I work out of Cabrini Green Legal Aid's office as a member of the organization, and am able to tap into all their resources. As sponsors, Seyfarth Shaw and United Airlines also provide support and resources in navigating these cases, and they help pro bono attorneys take forfeiture cases and represent some of our clients in court. The nice thing for me is that I have experts in how to run pro bono clinics and how to get pro bono attorneys involved at Cabrini Green Legal Aid, Seyfarth and United. I'm able to use all of the experience that Cabrini Green Legal Aid has in running clinics as well as attorneys like Steve and Averil, and Allegra Nethery and the attorneys at Seyfarth Shaw and United, who have been doing pro bono work for a long time.

Fus: In addition to resources and support, at times we provide facilities for debriefing meetings for the larger group or for Andrew to hold office hours, and Seyfarth Shaw generously provides office space so that Andrew can meet with attorneys who have cases and discuss the status and strategy that's associated with those cases.



We want to give our attorneys opportunities to improve access to justice for those in need.

— Averil Edwards

How did the project come about?

Hemmer: I came up with the project in conjunction with Cabrini Green Legal Aid. When we started the application process, I was interning for Aisha Edwards in the criminal defense program at Cabrini Green Legal Aid before my third year of law school. We were representing an individual in a criminal case but he also had a civil asset forfeiture case connected to it and a city vehicle impoundment case. That was the first time I was exposed to this area of law. The most striking thing was going to court and seeing the sheer number of people who didn't have anyone to represent them. That showed me the need. I drafted my application with CGLA's legal director, Beth Johnson, along with Aisha.

What drew United Airlines to this project?

Edwards: We could see there was a complicated legal process and burden being faced by many who cannot afford to hire a lawyer and which was not currently being addressed by any other legal aid organization. The project fit nicely with our model of wanting to give our attorneys opportunities to do pro bono work and improve access to justice for those in need in our own community.

Fus: Both Seyfarth Shaw and United had been involved with Cabrini Green Legal Aid for quite a number of years. Based on our past work with CGLA, we came to this with a high level of confidence. We've been doing criminal records expungement work with CGLA, primarily to assist those who are discriminated against as a result of a past arrest, typically something that

occurred years ago. It is often the case that because of that record, they're unable to get a job, a student loan or housing. We assist them with expungement and sealing, depending on what they're eligible for, so they can put that barrier behind them and move on with their life.

What other pro bono programs has United Airlines developed?

Fus: We're involved with about a half dozen different legal aid organizations. We've regularly partnered with the Center for Disability and Elder Law, going to senior centers with volunteer attorneys to draft and complete power of attorneys for property and healthcare and living will attestations.

Another organization is Equip for Equality. Volunteer attorneys take hotline calls from parents with children with disability rights issues that are not being properly accommodated by the schools. We provide assistance and guidance to the parent on how to navigate making sure that their child is able to get the education that they're entitled to.

We've been involved with the National Immigrant Justice Center in Chicago for a number of years doing immigration work, everything from deferred action for childhood arrival cases, to asylum cases, to U visa cases for those who have been victims of domestic violence or other crimes and who are willing to assist law enforcement with prosecution of the crime.

Every year we provide tax assistance through Ladder Up in completing tax forms for those who don't know how to do it themselves and can't afford to hire anyone to help them with it.

Legal Prep Charter Academy is a legal-themed high school in West Garfield Park in the Chicago suburbs. We provide instruction in a contract negotiations program and participate in a one-on-one mentoring program with the students.

One of the new things we're taking on is a community law clinic with Chicago Volunteer Legal Services to provide legal assistance to members of the community who otherwise cannot afford to hire a lawyer. Next year, we anticipate joining a program to provide legal assistance to veterans via a hotline.

What advice would you offer someone who wants to make a proposal to Equal Justice Works?

Hemmer: The key is finding a need in the community that is not being met or not being met adequately – and that is also something you personally really care about. The other thing for me is there are many opportunities for pro bono attorneys, so you want to find an issue where the area of law and the cases you'll be handling lend themselves well to pro bono attorney involvement.

What would your advice be to other corporate law departments looking to get involved in pro bono work? What lessons have you learned from your experiences thus far?

Edwards: Look at programs that are discrete opportunities to do pro bono. One of my favorite projects is the senior center clinic where we help with wills



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– Andrew Hemmer

and powers of attorney. That's a very discrete activity. You go to the senior center, spend a few hours there, and then you're done. Give people opportunities to do pro bono in a short time frame.

We've also learned that providing a wide variety of opportunities and the ability for people to do pro bono work directly from their desk are attractive features.

Fus: There are typically a couple of reasons why a corporate attorney will say they can't do pro bono work: either they don't have the time or they don't

have the expertise. Partnering with other lawyers in the legal department or the law firms they work with makes it easy to overcome those barriers because then you can share the workload. If you don't have the expertise, you can partner with someone and figure it out together, or partner with someone who may be more experienced. Most all legal aid organizations provide training and assistance as needed, so learning new skills is another benefit.

Giving in-house attorneys the opportunities to develop skills and traits that they don't otherwise get to develop in their day-to-day job – like going to court and making oral arguments before a judge, doing legal work that they might not otherwise traditionally do – helps them develop as lawyers. Those are good opportunities to become a much better, well-rounded lawyer.

Steven Fus is the Associate General Counsel for International, Alliances, Regulatory, Environmental, Health and Safety at United Airlines. He is the founding chair of United's legal department pro bono and community service program and is a regular participant in several of United's pro bono programs. He chairs the governing board of Cabrini Green Legal Aid and serves on the governing board of the Chicago Bar Foundation. He can be reached at steven.fus@united.com.

Averil Edwards is Counsel for Environmental, Health and Safety at United Airlines, where she provides legal advice to the company's business units on a wide variety of environmental, health and safety matters. Previously, she was an associate at a large law firm, where she represented clients in rulemaking proceedings and enforcement actions before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and numerous state agencies. She can be reached at averil.edwards@united.com.

Andrew Hemmer is an Equal Justice Works Fellow hosted by Cabrini Green Legal Aid (CGLA) in Chicago and sponsored by United Airlines and Seyfarth Shaw LLP. His focus is on creating the Civil Asset Forfeiture Defense Project (CAFDP) at CGLA, which provides representation to individuals who have had their vehicles impounded due to arrests, stopping further cycles of poverty. He can be reached at andrewhemmer@cglanet.

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