

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Pro bono work and helping others during COVID-19

Introduction

Anna Marrison, a partner in BLG's Toronto office, is the new chair of the firm's National Pro Bono Committee. Anna is working with the members of the committee to continue to support the firm's strong commitment to pro bono initiatives across the country.

We talked to Anna about the firm's history of pro bono work, her new role as chair, and how pro bono work has changed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Question 1 - Can you let us know a little about the history of pro bono work at BLG?

Pro bono work has long been a key priority for BLG, with firm leaders taking an active role in championing the work, including the late David W. Scott, who took on numerous leadership positions and led by example throughout his career. There was a great [article about it recently in ABC's National Magazine](#), where my colleagues [Michelle Henry](#) and [Erin Durant](#) were quoted, sharing their views on the importance of pro bono work and how meaningful it is to give back to our communities.

We have taken strides to align and harness the strength of our individual pro bono contributions into a collective benefit for our communities through the National Pro Bono Committee. As a firm, it is important that we continue to improve access to justice in our communities. Pro bono work also has a number of direct benefits to our lawyers, as it provides the opportunity to enhance skills (particularly for junior lawyers) and build or expand professional networks in the legal community.

Question 2 - You were appointed chair of the National Pro Bono Committee in October 2019. Can you tell us more about your role?

The National Pro Bono Committee has representatives across all our offices, who consider larger projects and inter-office mandates. We work together to identify pro bono opportunities and communicate those opportunities to lawyers across the country.

As national chair, I am a resource to lawyers and leadership on pro bono matters, which includes maintaining oversight of the national pro bono program, developing pro bono partnerships within our communities and approving new pro bono mandates.

Question 3 - What are some of the challenges pro bono work faces, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The pandemic has been especially harsh on those who are already the most disadvantaged. Since the pandemic some of the ways we provide services have changed, as is the case with the rest of our practices. Where we would regularly meet in person with a client, we are now offering virtual advice. I am particularly proud of the work we have done during the pandemic to give back to the most vulnerable in our communities and to support innovative organizations working to address the pandemic.

Question 4 - How do you think pro bono will evolve, moving forward?

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the way we work and participate in our communities, it has strongly impacted people in disadvantaged communities and the charitable organisations working for them. I think we are seeing broader support and an increase in interest for our different, more vulnerable communities who are facing funding issues.

I certainly hope that continues, as we need to ensure that disadvantaged communities have access to timely advice in order to make the most informed decisions in these new circumstances.

Question 5 - Can you share one or two of BLG's recent pro bono mandates?

A broad team of BLG lawyers with expertise in health law, real estate, and corporate and regulatory law recently provided a unique pro bono contribution to assist those experiencing homelessness and illness requiring isolation during the pandemic. This contribution was for the broader public good on a matter of significant community concern.

In addition, our privacy and data protection experts assisted a research institute in developing a COVID-19 public health mobile application for Canada to enhance social distancing strategies and help with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Question 6 - What inspires you about pro bono work?

Pro bono work is incredibly rewarding. Most lawyers feel they get as much or more than they give when working on pro bono mandates. I also see it as our profession's duty to provide access to justice, which is out of reach for many Canadians.