
2025

CALIFORNIA PRO BONO REPORT



Supporting Legal Services:

Examining the Pro Bono Landscape in California

Foreword



We are eager to share this report, a joint effort between our two organizations, that highlights the vital role pro bono volunteers plays in strengthening communities and stabilizing families.

“I began my career at OneJustice, organizing Justice Bus trips with law students from urban California to rural regions of our state. I spent a lot of time talking with law students about the importance of making pro bono a career-long commitment, no matter where they ended up working. We zoomed in on maps showing how few attorneys were in the rural regions of our state and showed them how extreme the need is. This experience led me to LAAC, where we now support the legal aid attorneys on the ground.”



Salena Copeland
Executive Director, LAAC



“I spent most of my career at the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area and Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto, where we saw the transformative impact of volunteers on the lives of families. I remember those moments. For example, when a family that had fled persecution was granted asylum in the United States. They burst into tears and hugged one another and their volunteer lawyers, with newfound hope for the future that lay ahead. I am now at OneJustice, and our team is committed to ensuring that volunteers have the support, training, and resources needed to transform even more lives.”

Phil Hwang CEO,
OneJustice

This 2025 Pro Bono Report shows where pro bono attorneys have the most impact. We hope that using the information gathered in this report will help the legal services sector meet the challenges ahead and become even more strategic in how we use our most important resource—people.



Key Findings

Pro bono service delivery models

- Around a third of respondents feature at least 90% of their pro bono hours as either full-scope or limited scope, signaling that they almost exclusively (or exclusively) rely on either limited-scope or full-scope. Clinics are utilized less frequently, representing 33% of total pro bono hours, but around 15% almost exclusively (or exclusively) use clinics for pro bono.
- Higher numbers of remote or virtual vs. in-person volunteering: Of volunteers, respondents found that 31% did pro bono in-person, while 65% were remote or virtual (and 20% hybrid).

Managing and supervising pro bono

- Fewer than half (**44%**) of respondents have a Pro Bono Director; around **20%** have a Pro Bono Manager. Outside of these positions, pro bono responsibilities fall on a more general volunteer or outreach position, or on a Directing or Staff Attorney.
- The size or makeup of program staffing has shifted since 2020: Mostly increasing (**48%**) their attorney pro bono staff as well as non-attorney pro bono staff (**27%**) (with no change for **35%**). Only **6%** decreased attorney pro bono staff or non-attorney pro bono staff (**4%**).

Number of Volunteers

- Total numbers of volunteers has increased for most organizations since 2020, with **47%** of respondents seeing numbers going up, but a significant number (**37%**) reported a decrease (some (**16%**) reported no change).

Benefits of Pro Bono

- Overwhelmingly (**91%**), organizations found that the main benefit from engaging pro bono volunteers is that they are able to serve more clients (overall more services provided). Many (**76%**) organizations found that volunteers taking on cases allows other staff to focus their attention elsewhere. Increased donations (relationship development) (**69%**) was another major benefit, along with increased funding generally (based on deliverables that include volunteer hours/engagement) (**53%**).

Effectiveness of Pro Bono and Best Practices

- **70%** found their pro bono program to be extremely effective (**18%**) or effective (**52%**).
- Many (**41%**) respondents described their clients as being satisfied with the pro bono services they received, but over half (**57%**) do not survey pro bono clients.

III. Introduction

California has not previously released a report on the landscape of pro bono in our state. Other states have released such reports, often in response to developments such as pro bono reporting, mandatory pro bono, or other initiatives aimed at increasing pro bono involvement in the state.¹ Consequently, this report serves as a baseline anchor for understanding pro bono trends in California.

While not intended, the timing of this report occurs around the time of at least a few important developments in California regarding pro bono. One, the passage of AB 2505, which will require attorneys to report the hours spent on pro bono work as part of their data collection in the annual licensing process with the State Bar of California.² This will, for one, provide critical data directly about pro bono in our state. Two, the introduction of the Pro Bono Portal, an effort by primarily rural-serving LSC-funded organizations to create a statewide database of pro bono opportunities. Finally, this report is also being released at a time of political upheaval, attacks on law firms and the rule of law, defunding and other threats to nonprofits, and other phenomena implicating pro bono, with the underlying survey and interviews conducted in 2024 and early 2025, respectively.

In this context, the goal of this report is to provide valuable information about the pro bono work being done in California, including how the work is being accomplished; who is involved and what the investment is; what kind of work is being done; how clients are experiencing pro bono work in terms of subject matter, scope of assistance, and more; and what kind of impact pro bono work is having on California overall.

Through our survey of the legal aid community in our state, legal services organizations (LSOs) have given us a significant glimpse into how pro bono is considered as part of a spectrum of legal services, how pro bono programs are designed to maximize impact, and, ultimately, what the effect of such programs is. To prepare a comprehensive report of the state of pro bono in California, we bring together these survey tools, data collection (informal requests and public records act requests), and interviews to identify who is doing pro bono, when they're doing pro bono, how they're doing pro bono (types of cases, tech tools utilized), where they're doing pro bono, and the impact that pro bono has on legal services organizations and low-income Californians in need of legal assistance.

IV. Research Conducted and Data Collected

LAAC and OneJustice set out to identify the most reliable sources of information about pro bono work in California, trying to avoid duplication as much as possible. All legal services organizations funded by the State Bar are required to provide information about their volunteers. And specific organizations that receive targeted pro bono funding, have to provide additional details. The State Bar was able to share that data with us to give us an overall sense of the number of volunteers and number of hours. This provides a macro understanding of pro bono trends in our state.

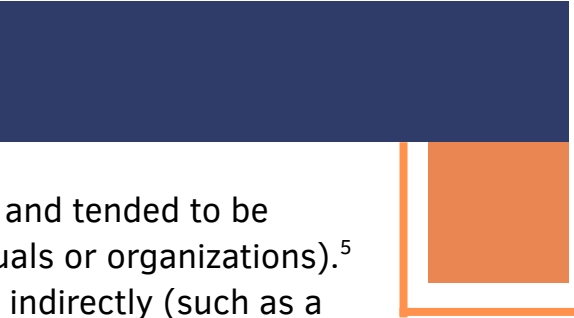
We developed a survey to send to LSOs, identifying the key components of their pro bono programs. We wanted to get a sense of how LSOs across the state are approaching pro bono—what investments they are making in terms of staffing and funding, how pro bono is viewed in their organization, and how pro bono contributes to accomplishing the mission and goals of the organization. We also wanted to get an idea of where organizations were having success with pro bono, and where the challenges were. Because it was thorough, the survey took organizations a little more than 30 minutes to complete, and we are grateful to the organizations that took the time to share their information with us. We also conducted interviews with pro bono managers and others at LSOs.

We did also prepare and circulate a survey to those providing pro bono volunteers, including law firms, corporate legal departments, law schools, and individual volunteers. However, no single group provided sufficient information to be able to draw conclusions from the data we collected. Therefore, we are not reporting back on the information that we gathered, but instead are using reliable data from other sources to discuss their role in the network.

We reviewed and synthesized data from other sources, including from the Pro Bono Institute (PBI), the American Bar Association (ABA) survey, and the American Association of Law Schools (AALS), to ground our findings in dialogue with other critical pro bono research.

A. Pro Bono Data Literature Review

According to the American Bar Association (ABA), nationally, 76% of attorneys have engaged in pro bono at some point in their careers.³ Around 20% provide at least 50 hours of pro bono in a year, but another approximately 20% never do pro bono.⁴ Pro bono tended to be limited-



scope (42%) (as opposed to full representation or mediation), and tended to be directed at individuals (82%) (as opposed to groups of individuals or organizations).⁵ More than 70% were connected with the pro bono opportunity indirectly (such as a referral); the most common area of law was family law (21%); and 65% took cases in their area of expertise.⁶

While most attorneys surveyed consider pro bono services to be somewhat or very important, just 52% said they were likely or very likely to engage in such services.⁷ Finally, helping people in need, reducing social inequality, and meeting ethical obligations were the main motivating factors; lack of time, commitments to family or other personal obligations, and lack of malpractice insurance were the main discouraging factors.⁸

For more California-focused data, we also can turn to additional ABA data analyzed by the State Bar of California.⁹ Over half of California attorneys did not do any pro bono in 2022, which was unchanged since 2016.¹⁰ Three-quarters of attorneys, though, had provided pro bono services at some point in their career.¹¹ However, more attorneys (23%) are meeting the Bar's goal of performing 50 or more hours of pro bono in 2022, which was an increase of 20% from 2016.¹² Attorneys are also doing more pro bono work: Attorneys that do pro bono work, on average, performed 116 hours, which was an increase of 47% from 2016.¹³ Based on this, the Bar estimated that around 88,000 active California attorneys provided pro bono, engaging in almost 10 million hours of pro bono.¹⁴ This, in turn, means these attorneys provide the equivalent of work output in terms of hours of 4,700 full-time attorneys, helping support the legal aid system.¹⁵

As we discuss later, too, the Bar found that lawyers that do not do pro bono work point to time constraints, lack of resources, malpractice concerns, and more as their reasons.¹⁶ On the flip side, the most helpful support from their employers that attorneys could get to conduct pro bono work was being allowed to do pro bono during business hours and providing internal resources, with almost half of attorneys who do not do pro bono work saying their employer does not let them do pro bono during work hours.¹⁷

B. State Bar of California Pro Bono Data as Reported by Legal Aid Grantees

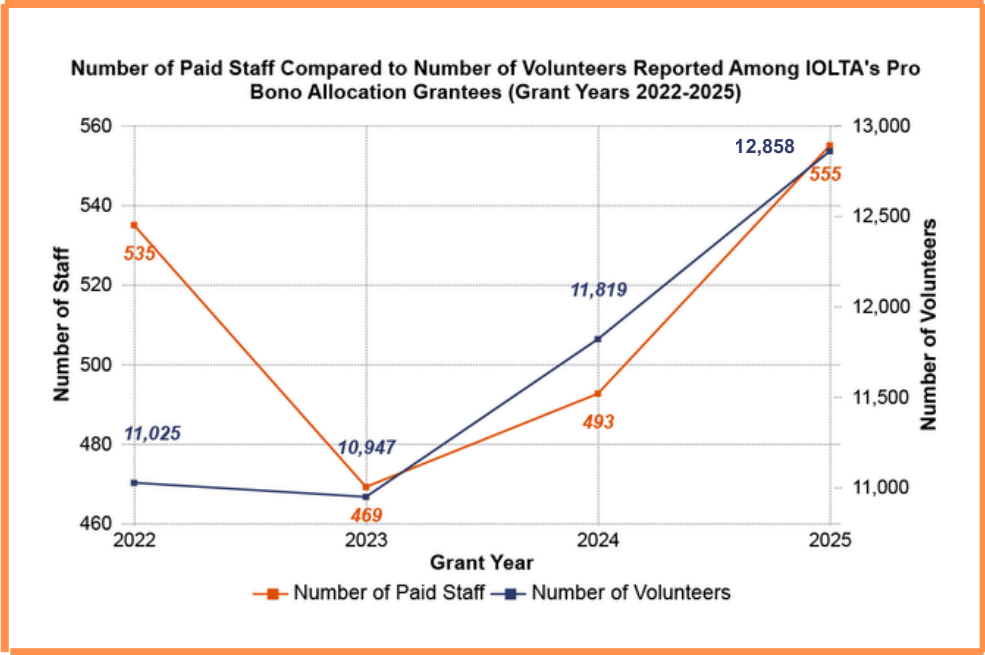
The State Bar provided us with pro bono data and volunteer data for 2020–2023 by legal aid grantees. This gives us a macro sense of pro bono trends for legal aid nonprofits, including.

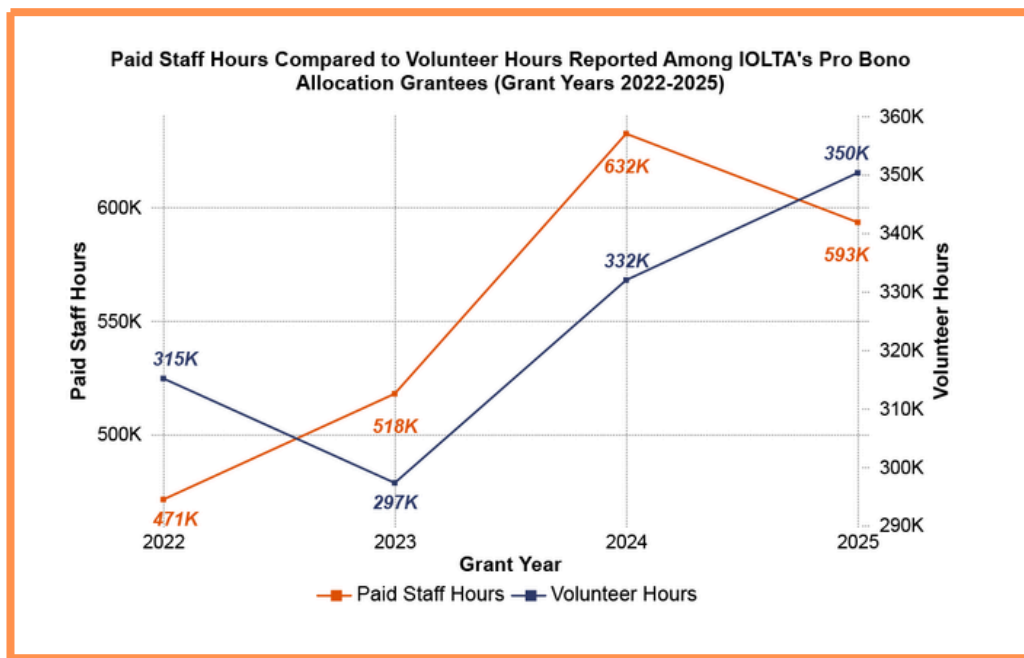
average number of attorney volunteers and hours, total numbers of attorney volunteers and hours, and the relative weight of those receiving a specific pro bono-related funding allocation

i. Average Number of Volunteer Attorneys and Hours

According to State Bata data¹⁸ for all¹⁹ IOLTA-funded legal aid organizations, these nonprofits hosted an average of 114 volunteer attorneys per organization to provide an average of 2,850 volunteer attorneys hours per organization annually for 2020–2023. Many organizations (40%) do not rely on pro bono assistance as part of their service delivery modality (i.e., they have zero attorney volunteers). Many others rely on volunteers in the 100 to 500 volunteer range; one organization, at the highest end, engages over 2,000 pro bono attorneys in a year alone.

As we can see there is a range of engagement with pro bono lawyers in terms of service delivery models, but, in total, pro bono is important across the board for legal aid on an average basis, and some organizations heavily rely on pro bono as part of their model.

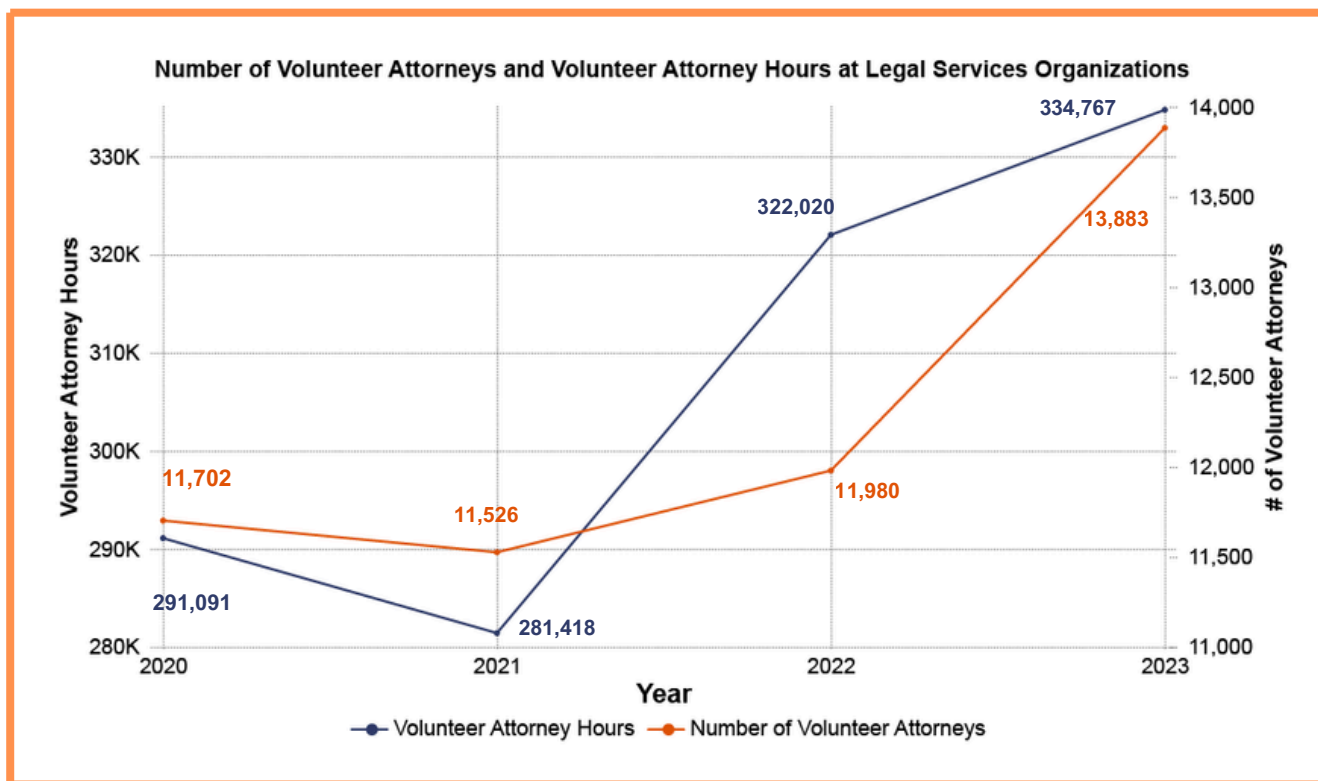




ii. Total Numbers of Volunteer Attorneys and Hours

While the above numbers indicate the sector-wide use of pro bono help on average and for particular organizations, the total annual number of attorneys and annual number of attorney hours tells a more impactful story. Volunteer attorneys, in total, produce a huge amount of work for legal aid nonprofits and the communities they serve, helping bolster the direct legal services these nonprofits already provide.

In 2023, 13,883 volunteer attorneys performed 334,767 volunteer attorneys hours with legal aid nonprofits in California, presenting as the highest numbers, in both regards, in the past few years. In 2022, 11,980 volunteer attorneys performed 322,020 volunteer attorneys hours; in 2021, 11,526 volunteer attorneys performed 281,418 volunteer attorneys hours; and, in 2020, 11,702 volunteer attorneys performed 291,091 volunteer attorneys hours. We can see a large volume, as well as a clear trendline up, in regard to increased numbers of both attorneys and hours performed by pro bono attorneys working collaboratively with legal aid nonprofits. This trendline could be attributed to a number of factors, including the Pro Bono Portal facilitating and making it easier to do pro bono work.



iii. Pro Bono Allocation Service Providers as Proportion of All IOLTA-Funded Organizations

Finally, while across the board, many organizations tap into pro bono to supplement their existing work, it is especially important for the organizations that heavily rely on attorney volunteers for their core service delivery model. Consequently, these organizations constitute a large portion of the above numbers of volunteer attorneys and volunteer attorney hours, and are highly efficient at recruiting and utilizing these attorneys with smaller paid staff.²⁰ These organizations constitute a significant portion of the actual pro bono offered in California via legal aid, even though they are around 30% of all IOLTA-funded organizations.²¹ These organizations account for 229,279 attorney volunteer hours alone on average annually across 2020–2023, which is 75% of the total annual average across all legal aid organizations.²² Thus, while legal aid generally utilizes pro bono to deliver services, a smaller proportion of organizations provide the majority of pro bono-based assistance across our state.

C. Pro Bono Institute Report

To understand the full ecosystem, we also need to acknowledge that law firm staffing and priorities impact the availability of pro bono legal services. A legal services organization could set forth the most efficient, effective pro bono project, but if no private lawyers are available or willing to take on the work, it would be difficult to call that project a success.

The Pro Bono Institute surveys law firms every year on a variety of topics to understand the way law firms approach pro bono work. One of those reports is a staffing survey. The data currently available was reported in 2024 and was from 76 law firms across the United States.²³

It is important to note that this staffing survey was conducted before the current federal administration issued Executive Orders (EOs) attacking law firms specifically for their pro bono work. In the wake of those EOs, the landscape of pro bono professionals has changed slightly, with some choosing to leave their firm, especially if their firm made a deal with the administration, and others seeing restrictions on their role and freedom to bring in pro bono projects.


i. Staffing

Ninety-two percent of responding firms reported that they employ one or more pro bono professionals.²⁴ Of those firms, 62% have pro bono professionals that dedicate all of their time to pro bono program management. About 30% have pro bono professionals who split their

time between oversight and substantive representation of pro bono clients. And about 30% have pro bono professionals who have substantial non-pro bono responsibilities.²⁵ Many of the reporting firms reported more than one pro bono professional at their firm, which is why the numbers add up to more than 100%. Pro bono professionals at firms with 50-199 attorneys are significantly more likely to have substantial non-pro bono responsibilities.²⁶

These non-pro bono responsibilities may include community service, corporate social responsibility programs, sustainability projects, professional development, and diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI) efforts.²⁷

The PBI report found that 87% of all firms have a pro bono committee, whether or not they also employ pro bono professionals. The report also found that if a firm does not have a full-



time pro bono professional, the firm instead has a pro bono committee overseeing their pro bono program.²⁸

More recently, law firms have been hiring staff with substantive legal knowledge in the firm's pro bono practice areas. We have seen these positions in immigration and in small business/nonprofit transactional work in particular. Of the responding law firms that employ pro bono professionals, 24% employ one or more full-time staff to provide oversight in a single practice area.²⁹ Another 14% employ professionals who spend all of their time handling pro bono cases, or supervising the pro bono work of the lawyers at the firm. About 60% spend time handling their own cases, 30% spend their time on supervision, and the remaining 10% do both equally.³⁰

ii. Structure

The PBI survey found that associates are the primary providers of pro bono legal services, with the survey finding that associates are responsible for about 80% of the direct representation.³¹ Associates clearly dedicate substantial time to client-facing pro bono work. Lawyers with the titles Partner and Counsel spend more of their pro bono time on supervision and strategic support. These two titles are the ones primarily responsible for supervising associates in their direct services pro bono work.

The pro bono professionals at law firms are the ones primarily in charge of coordinating pro bono projects, clinics and matters; designing or soliciting new pro bono projects; establishing, developing, or maintaining contact with legal services and community organizations that are a source of pro bono matters; reviewing, revising, and developing policies regarding pro bono; and screening and approving new pro bono matters. In general, those responsibilities are handled by professionals with the "Director" or "Partner" title.

This data indicates that the management of law firm pro bono programs is generally centralized, either in a smaller group of pro bono professionals who lead the work at the firm, or in a pro bono committee. While associates may have an interest in engaging in pro bono work, they largely must go through the structure and processes set up by their employer law firm.

D. AALS Survey and Report

The AALS surveys law schools across the country to understand the impact law students have on pro bono legal services. In January 2023, AALS reported that law students from the 69 responding law schools performed over 3,000,000 hours of pro bono legal assistance nationwide. The report does not break down the data by state, but calculates an average of about 68 hours per student. The AALS defines pro bono work broadly, including externships at legal aid and community organizations, law school clinics, and law student organization-led projects.

With just over 17,000 law students at ABA-accredited law schools in California, if each student averages about 68 hours of pro bono work each year, that's approximately 1,100,000 hours of pro bono legal services provided by California law students each calendar year.

E. California LSO Survey

i. Respondent Demographics

Our survey had 69 respondents, representing well over half of the legal aid community. In terms of the demographics of respondent legal aid organizations, 99% of respondents were IOLTA-funded and, in terms of geography, 88% of respondents serve urban communities, 88% serve suburban communities, and 69% serve rural communities. Again, the survey was distributed in mid-2024, before the election and change in administration, which has, of course, impacted funding and therefore pro bono staffing at organizations since then.

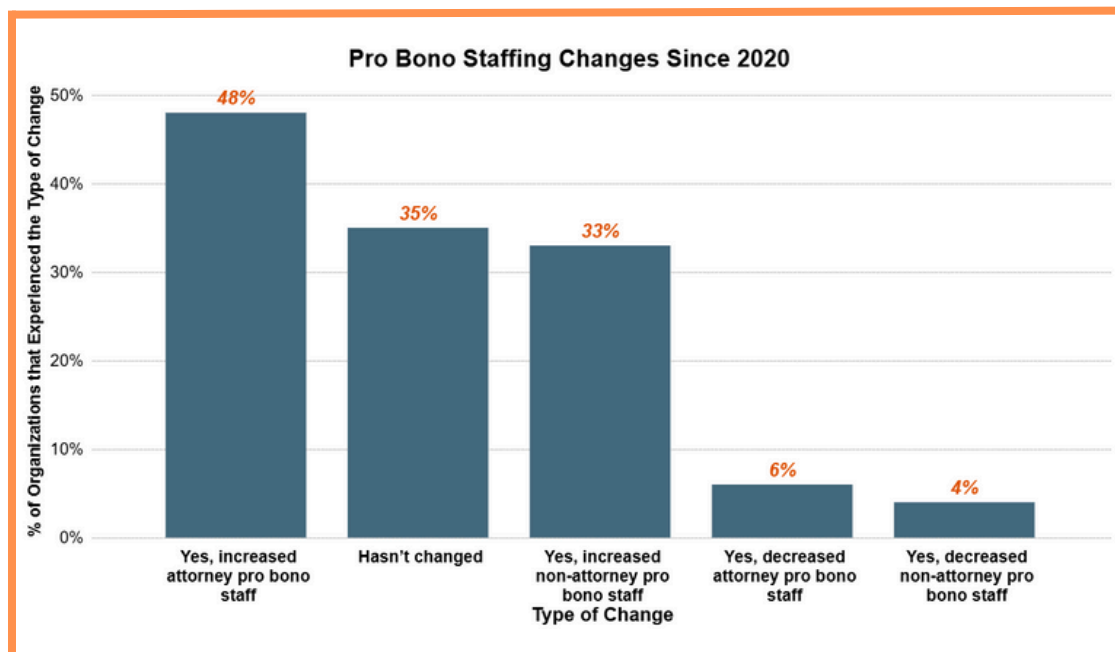
ii. Program Setup

a) Staffing: Who Manages and Supervises Pro Bono

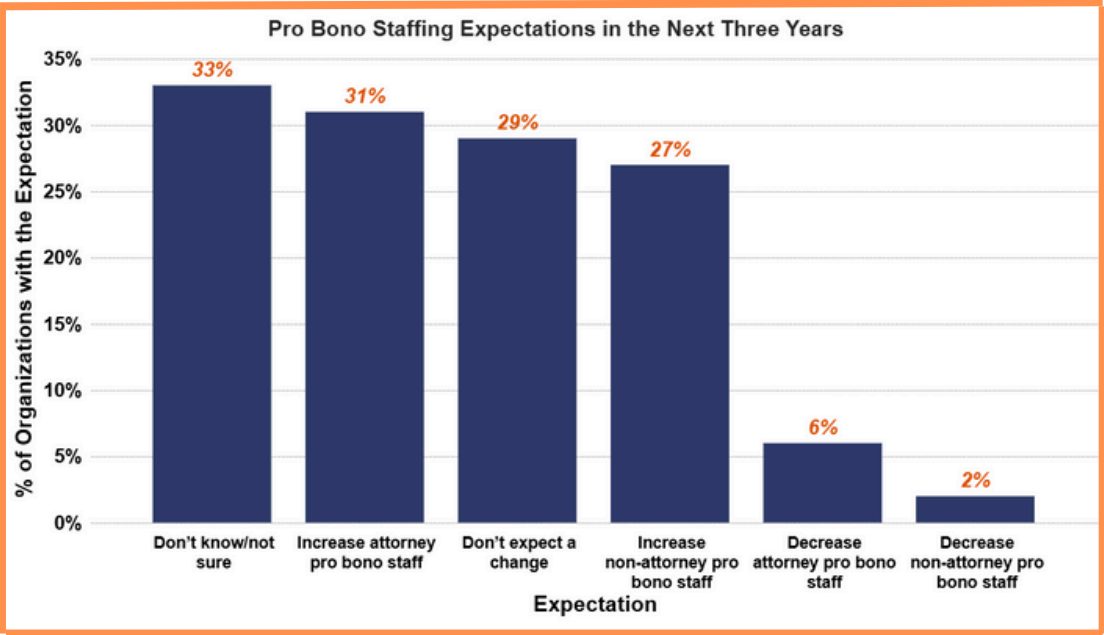
The makeup of pro bono staff at legal services organizations varies greatly. Fewer than half (44%) of the organizations surveyed have a Pro Bono Director position. Around 20% of organizations have a Pro Bono Manager. Outside of these positions, pro bono responsibilities fall on a more general volunteer or outreach position, or on a Directing or Staff Attorney who usually spends 25% or less of their time on pro bono. For organizations that have a Pro Bono Director, they average about 3 full-time staff. Without such a position, they average about 1.8 full-time staff.

In regard to who does or supervises pro bono work, pro bono staff are generally mostly focused on recruiting volunteers (93%) and providing training to volunteers (82%), but they also partially supervise pro bono cases (64%) and clinics (58%). Some directly supervise pro bono cases (42%).

Based on our survey tool, the size or makeup of program staffing has shifted since 2020. In the last four years, organizations largely changed the size or makeup of the pro bono staff in favor of expansion, with nearly half (48%) having increased their attorney pro bono staff and a sizable number (33%) increasing non-attorney pro bono staff. Many (35%) saw no change, though. Few (6%) decreased attorney pro bono staff or decreased non-attorney pro bono staff (4%). Last, we did not see a correlation between budget size and number of pro bono positions based on our data (i.e., higher budget does not always equal more pro bono staff and vice versa). However, there was a correlation between those who (a) noted an increase in volunteer numbers (below) and (b) an increase in pro bono staff: Of those noting an increase in total volunteer numbers, 74% increased pro bono attorney staff (compared to 48% overall) and 32% increased non-attorney pro bono staff (compared to 33%).



Many expect their pro bono staffing to change in favor of an increase in the next three years. Over one-third (31%) predict an increase in attorney pro bono staff, with 27% expecting an increase in non-attorney pro bono staff. Around one-third (29%) do not expect a change, and 33% do not know or are not sure. Few (6%) expect a decrease in attorney pro bono staff or (2%) a decrease in non-attorney pro bono staff.



There were a range of reasons for shifts, but most respondents discussed funding as a key reason either for having or not having staff for the organization’s pro bono work. For one organization, the decisions were based on in-house attorney time: “We needed dedicated attorney time to provide substantive legal support/mentorship of pro bono cases to take the burden off in-house program attorney time.” In terms of the impact of increasing staffing, organizations described how additional staff allows them to engage more pro bono attorneys and that they are able to serve more people and start new projects. Decreasing staffing can result in less organized pro bono programs and fewer pro bono partnerships.

Program Highlight

Family Violence Appellate Project: Pro bono service model focuses on increasing the availability of services.

FVAP operates under a pro bono service model designed to increase the availability of legal services. As a support center, FVAP focuses on securing published decisions in family law cases that strengthen protections for survivors. The organization co-counsels every case, maintaining close collaboration with pro bono volunteers and cultivating lasting partnerships with trusted law firms.

Because pro bono work is fully integrated into FVAP's case handling, the organization does not have a dedicated Pro Bono Director. Instead, the Director of Programs often leads new partnerships, while the small, connected staff collectively manages relationships with firms and volunteers statewide. Given FVAP's size, scope and integrated approach there is not a need for a pro bono director. Funding requests include pro bono activities as part of the organization's overall budget, reflecting how deeply this work is embedded in its mission.

b) Service Delivery Models

Organizations reported that they engaged in limited-scope (or “unbundled” services) 67% of their total pro bono hours, and full-scope representation at lower rates of their total hours (49%). Comparable numbers of organizations (about a third of respondents) feature at least 90% of their pro bono hours as one or the other model, signalling that they almost exclusively (or exclusively) rely on either limited-scope or full-scope. In addition, clinics represented 33% of total hours, with only some almost exclusively or exclusively (around 15%) using clinics as their pro bono service delivery model.

Program Highlight

Oasis Legal Services: Strategic partnerships expanding to client-facing work.

Oasis is an immigration legal services organization in California serving the LGBTQ+ community. They strategically partner with law firms who have responsive and dedicated pro bono staff. Oasis values the ongoing, longer-term relationships that allow the volunteers to more fully understand the case work and their clients. When Oasis was founded eight years ago, they only worked with law firm volunteers for behind-the-scenes research projects and dedicated retired attorneys with flexible schedules to support client-facing work. In 2024 they expanded client-facing pro bono opportunities to meet the increasing need for immigration legal services. Oasis now engages four law firms to represent clients at naturalization hearings, draft affirmative asylum declarations, and support clients filing affirmative and defensive applications through legal clinics. Oasis has a dedicated pro bono program director. This person is focused on pro bono coordination and has past experience as an executive director, so she is thinking strategically about how they invest in pro bono relationships, what direction they go next in terms of client-facing pro bono work, and how to steward the relationships with firms for long-term fundraising goals.

In terms of percentage of volunteers that are remote or virtual vs. in-person volunteers, respondents found that 31% of volunteers are in-person, while 65% are remote or virtual and 20% hybrid.

It is not very common for someone doing pro bono within the clinical setting, or limited-scope model, to go on to become a case-handling or full-scope pro bono volunteer. In regard to the frequency with which a clinic or limited-scope volunteer becomes a case-handling or full-scope volunteer, most (44%) organizations found that this never happens (they only engage with clinic or limited-scope volunteers). Otherwise, the same percentage (44%) found this happens around 20% of the time (about one in five clinic/limited scope volunteers take on a case). Very few (3%) reported 40% or 60% became a case-handling or full-scope volunteer, respectively, and none (0%) reported 80% of the time. Some (6%) did find that this happens 100% of the time. Additionally, an attorney within legal aid organizations co-counsels on a pro bono case with a volunteer sometimes (36%).

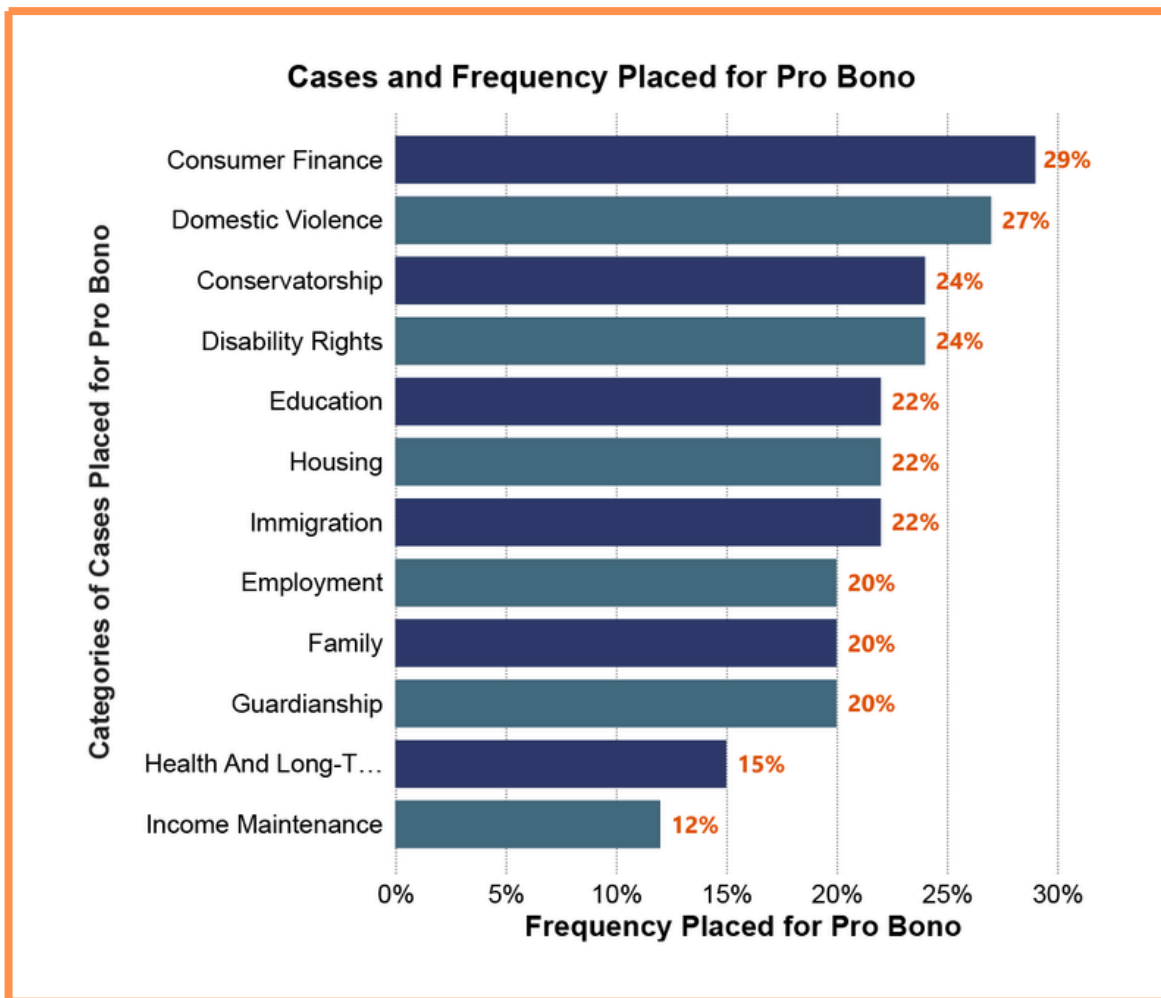
Program Highlight

Asian Law Alliance: Pro bono as a specific, but integral of a service delivery system.

ALA engages in pro bono, as a specific part of the organization's service delivery strategy. The Deputy Director does much of the work around pro bono recruitment, but works closely with their Community Engagement Coordinator who engages in outreach, recruitment and training. In addition, staff working on specific projects are expected to recruit and engage with pro bono volunteers. Much of their pro bono is done in limited scope opportunities, like naturalization clinics and intakes. The organization does engage pro bono volunteers on longer-term cases; in some cases the volunteer takes over the case and in others the organization remains attorney of record with the volunteer working behind the scenes. The organization thinks critically about the impact of pro bono on the organization and their clients. Ultimately, the Deputy Director primarily sees pro bono as one part of the solution to turn away fewer clients when they call and they are exploring more pro bono expansion in the future.

c) Case Type Frequency

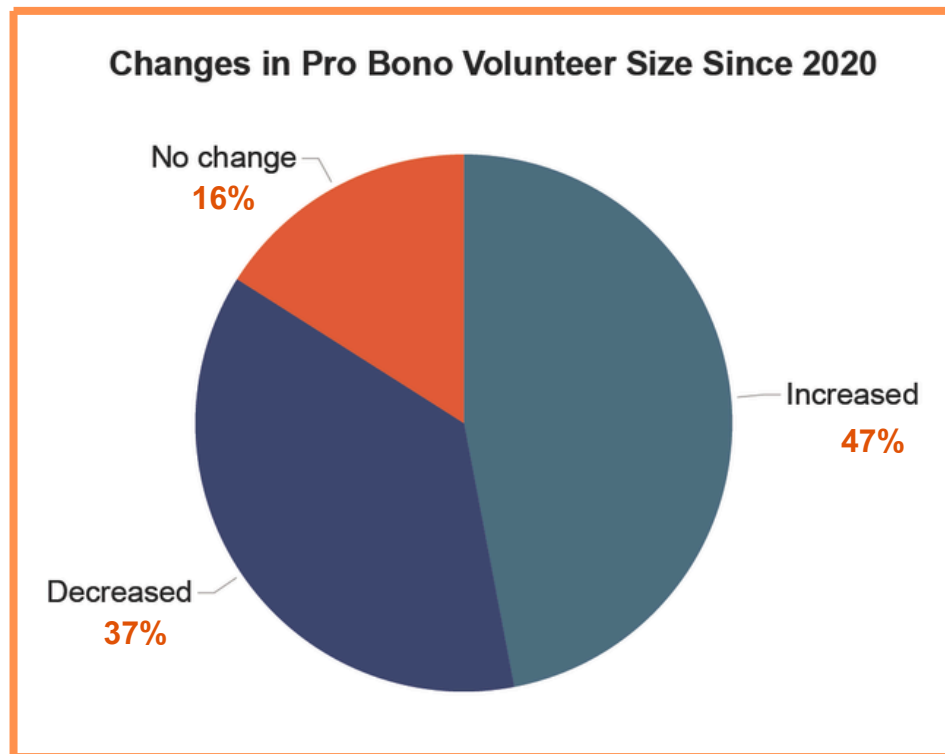
For respondents, consumer finance (29%), domestic violence (27%), conservatorship (24%), and disability rights (24%) ranked as the top categories of cases placed for pro bono. They were followed by housing (22%), immigration (22%), and education (22%); employment (20%), family (20%), and guardianship (20%) were next. Health and long-term care (15%) and income maintenance (12%) were also placements for pro bono, but less common.



iii. Number of Volunteers and Size and Makeup of Pro Bono Staffing

a) Number of Pro Bono Volunteers

Virtually all organizations utilize volunteers, at 96%, in their pro bono work, the majority of which are pro bono lawyers, but paralegals, law students, law graduates, and undergraduate students also help with pro bono work.



The total number of volunteers, since 2020, has mostly increased, with 47% of respondents seeing numbers going up. A significant number (37%) reported a decrease, however. Some (16%) reported no change. While this indicates a decrease for some, and no changes for others, almost half of respondents did see an increase over the past four years. This is interesting given the fact that, overall, there has been an increase in pro bono lawyers and hours across 2020–2023 overall (section B above), indicating that some organizations may have seen the majority of that increase.

While there could be a number of organizational qualities and factors influencing this, we looked at a couple possible rationales. First, analyzing this with organizational budget size, there was no indication of a significant correlation between organization budget size and

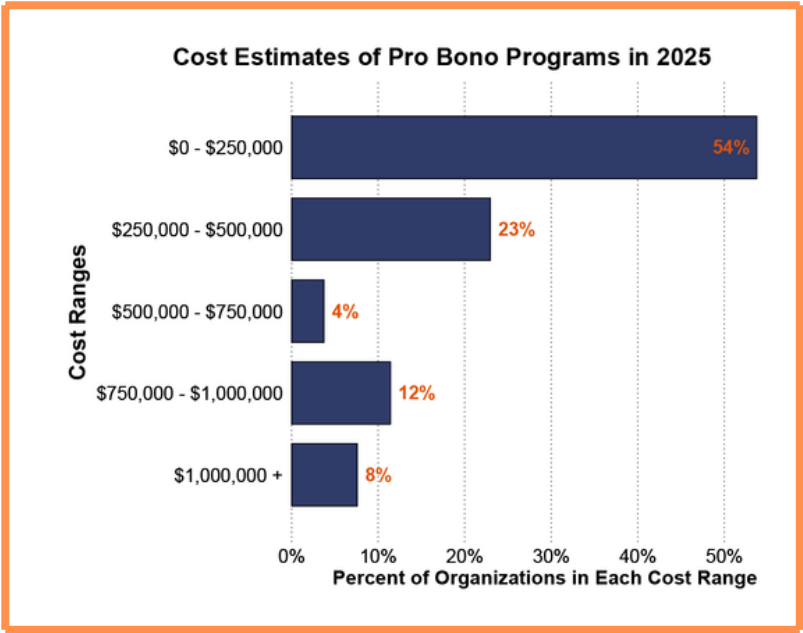
whether they were seeing increases or decreases in volunteer numbers. There was also no significant correlation between increases and decreases for those who receive the pro bono allocation from the State Bar. Hence, our comparative analysis was inconclusive as to why numbers were going up for some organizations and decreasing for others. This is likely due to the challenges organizations noted under other survey questions, such as staffing, commitment, case scope, training materials, and more.

Total number of volunteer hours, in the last four years, has similarly to total number of volunteers largely increased (49%), but a significant portion (41%) noted a decrease, with 10% noting no change. This presents a mixed combination of increases and decreases across providers.

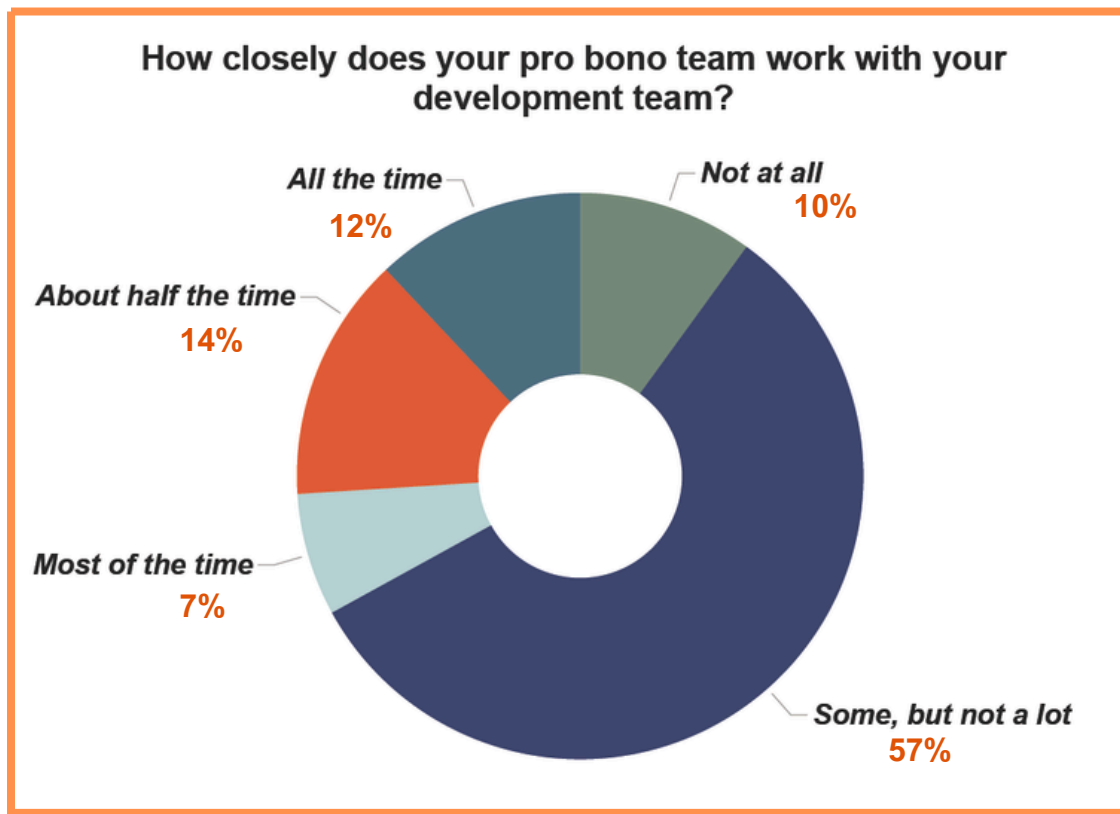
Hence, in alignment with State Bar data, we see an increase in total volunteers as well as total number of hours, as reported by legal aid nonprofits. While our data was inconclusive as to why some organizations reported an increase and some a decrease (we did not see a correlation with budget size or receipt of the pro bono allocation), this leads us to believe it may have just been individual organizational decisions (including due to funding), at least in part.³²

iv. Cost and Development

Based on respondents' estimates, the average total expected cost of their pro bono programs in 2025 was \$496,673, with the highest being over \$1,000,000 and the lowest being around \$25,000. To estimate this cost, organizations were instructed to include salary, benefits, all non-personnel budgeted costs, among other costs related to running such a program.



Pro bono teams and development teams work together a fair amount, but there is room to increase how closely they are working. Organizations primarily reported (57%) that they work together some, but not a lot. Still, 14% found that they work together about half of the time, 7% most of the time, and 12% all of the time. Just 10% said not at all.



v. Role, Benefits, and Value of Pro Bono

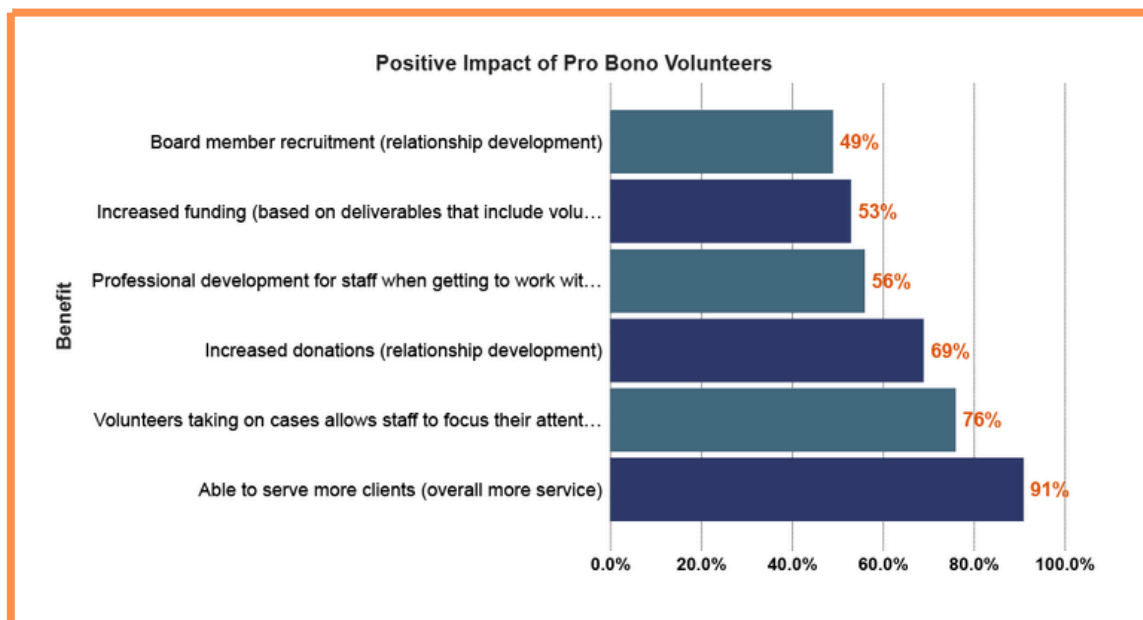
a) Role of Pro Bono in Increasing Access to Justice

In regard to how much pro bono contributes to organizations’ access-to-justice efforts, most (85%) strongly agreed (69%) or agreed (16%) that pro bono work significantly contributed to promoting access to justice, with some (11%) somewhat agreeing. Just four percent disagree with the idea, with few somewhat disagreeing (2%) or strongly disagreeing (2%).

Organizations were also asked about how pro bono fits within their service delivery model. Most (53%) respondents found that they are doing OK but there is always room for improvement. Many (36%) found that pro bono was either a great fit (18%) or that it fits in relatively seamlessly with their service delivery model (18%). Some (11%) found pro bono to be a pain point and that they could use some help. Zero (0%) selected that they do not use the term “pro bono” at their organization.

b) Benefits

Overwhelmingly (91%), organizations found that the main benefit from engaging pro bono volunteers is that they are able to serve more clients (overall more services provided). Many (76%) organizations found that volunteers taking on cases allows other staff to focus their attention elsewhere. Increased donations (relationship development) (69%) was another major benefit, along with increased funding generally (based on deliverables that include volunteer hours/engagement) (53%). More than half (56%) found a benefit in the professional development for staff when getting to work with experienced pro bono volunteers. Last, nearly half (49%) considered board member recruitment (relationship development) to be a benefit.



The provision of pro bono services helps organizations achieve their missions, support their core values, and other goals in an array of ways. They are able to increase capacity and representation as well as provide more services than their staff can provide; expand the resources provided to the communities they serve; expand their external partnerships, enhance donations, and support the organization as board members; and more. As one organization put it: “By leveraging pro bono resources, we are able to increase our clients’ access to legal services.” To another, it is connected to funding: “We look for opportunities for

pro bono where we do not have adequate staffing. It allows us to expand the kind of work we do, while making sure that staff is focusing on funded priorities.” Altogether, pro bono plays an important role of increasing access to justice through capacity, funding, and expertise.

In terms of other outcomes and impacts from pro bono beyond the individual assistance provided the client, organizations primarily (80%) identified meeting deliverables for funding purposes (e.g., LSC PAI, IOLTA, Pro Bono Allocation, specific grants including pro bono hours) as of value to the organization. Relationship development (volunteer for other programs, board members, etc.) (89%) and repeat engagement (volunteer for future matters) (82%) were also of value to many organizations. Donations (individual or corporate/firm donor, including “pay to play” arrangements where volunteers have access to certain types of pro bono programming in exchange for a donation) (69%) and in-kind donations or relationship-building to other donor sources (62%), were other benefits as well.

Program Highlight—

Inner City Law Center: Pro bono expands and complements staff services.

The primary goal of pro bono at Inner City Law Center is to provide holistic services to their clients. Pro bono volunteers help with capacity building, allowing the organization to serve clients in areas where there is no external expertise, and to serve more clients in areas where staff also work.

While they are able to collect a lot of great data from the impact of their pro bono work, they still can't capture the full scope of the impact. For instance, there are discrete projects that may pop up in the middle of a case being handled by staff or other pro bono volunteers that are not captured in their case management system. It is difficult to understand the full scope of impact; for instance the people impacted by preventing an eviction may not just be the family that gets to stay in their home, but also the extended family or friends who may have had to step in to support them if the eviction had occurred.

The organization has been very strategic with their pro bono work. As the organization grows in size, they have increased their administrative support at almost the same rate. For instance, if a new grant comes in with deliverables that include pro bono, then pro bono staffing is increased. The leadership of the organization feels strongly that pro bono should not be forced, but that it is an integral part of any legal services program, and that when it is done right, it is not a burden but rather a benefit to all involved, most importantly the clients.

Program Highlight

Public Counsel: Identity as a pro bono law firm

The priority of the organization—including in their strategic plan—is to increase opportunities to leverage pro bono resources to help clients. Pro bono is baked into everything they do, including hiring, because the expectation is that staff will interact with and engage pro bono in many aspects of their work. The connection between funding and pro bono work is substantial, with direct donations and other financial contributions, like cy pres awards and assignment of attorney fee awards, being an important derivative of the relationships built through pro bono relationships.

vii. Effectiveness of Pro Bono and Best Practices

a) Effectiveness

Most (70%) regarded their pro bono program as extremely effective (18%) or effective (52%). Some (25%) believe their program is somewhat effective, leaving room for improvement. Few (5%) regarded their program as somewhat ineffective, and none (0%) considered it ineffective.

In terms of what clients believe about the effectiveness of respondents' pro bono programs, many (41%) respondents described their clients as being satisfied with the pro bono services they received. Thirty percent found that their clients felt that the pro bono volunteer(s) listened to them, and 30% found that their clients believed the pro bono volunteer(s) achieved a positive outcome for them. Twenty-seven percent selected that clients believed the pro bono volunteer(s) understood their goals.

Just 5% of respondents selected that the clients wished the pro bono volunteer(s) could have done more for them. Zero (0%) of respondents selected that their clients felt that they would have been better served by someone other than the pro bono volunteer(s); zero (0%) also indicated that the clients were uncomfortable working with the pro bono volunteers. Critically, more than half (57%) of respondents do not survey pro bono clients.



Program Highlight

Justice & Diversity Center: Working with limited resources, with a goal to improve data.

Pro bono as part, but not a big, part of a service delivery system. The Justice & Diversity Center is a unique organization in that it is closely connected to its local Bar Association, meaning that the pro bono aspect also incorporates mobilization and engagement of the Bar membership. However, the Pro Bono Director still strongly considers pro bono's primary purpose at the organization to be part of meeting the goal of providing the highest quality services to the most low-income people that they can reach. She sees a huge value in general legal clinics, where volunteers can utilize their specific expertise to assist clients, and can, most of the time, get the clients the resources they need for their next step(s). At the organization, the Pro Bono Director does also engage in fundraising to support the pro bono program, but is not directly connected with the development team for the organization as a whole. The organization tracks the metrics it needs to track to comply with grant requirements, but a dream would be to engage a data specialist on staff to better review the impact of pro bono on the individuals, but also the larger community.

b) Challenges and Barriers

In regard to challenges, respondents named a number of different issues. Pro bono can require administrative work; a lack of pro bono attorneys in rural regions; resistance by staff to utilize pro bono attorneys; resistance by pro bono attorneys to do the cases that the organization needs help with; figuring out the right model for each legal unit; training volunteers as well as developing and updating training materials; matching pro bono attorneys with the case duration they want (e.g., short-term or limited-scope); insufficient pro bono staff; ensuring that the pro bono attorneys communicate and fulfill deliverables; recruitment for specific languages and legal expertise; and more.

Although pro bono attorneys who are less conversant with some of the practice areas included in a legal service's organization's service model, like immigration or housing, may initially be less efficient in doing the work than the legal services organization's own staff, the benefit of exposing broader segments of the legal profession to central social justice issues, particularly in terms of activating potential new champions in the fight to protect the rule of law, is significant.

For private lawyers, the main barriers included not enough time to do pro bono (68%), they need interpretation assistance and do not have any (35%), and that they cannot get approval from their employer (32%). Other major reasons were that there were no pro bono opportunities in their area (27%), that they do not get billable hour credit (22%), there is not enough training or support (22%), or that their employer would not cover the costs of a pro bono case (19%).

Program Highlight

Larger Legal Services Organization: Limited scope clinics as a way to meet pro bono requirements.

This larger organization utilizes pro bono primarily through clinics and other limited scope opportunities. They have found it increasingly difficult to recruit attorneys to take on full scope representation, primarily because there is less support and encouragement from the firms to do so. For instance, firms are not utilizing pro bono as a way of training new associates anymore; they are less likely to let an associate take a pro bono case with them if they lateral from one firm to another; and firms are experiencing turnover, they express more frequently that they are “too busy” to engage in pro bono. There are also areas where the staff are ready, willing, and able to support pro bono volunteers, but the subject matter is not an area that works for the volunteers (e.g., family law). Lastly, the pro bono and development teams have not historically worked closely together, so the correlation between pro bono and funding is not easily understood.

c) Best Practices

In regard to specific strategies or best practices to maximize the impact of pro bono work within their organization, respondents noted a number of implementations. Most (74%) respondents implemented specific strategies or best practices to maximize the impact of pro bono work within their organization. These include using volunteers to help with administrative work; centralizing clinics and using pro bono portals; selecting cases that require less technical assistance or staff time to manage the pro bono work; remote volunteer opportunities; training libraries; getting repeat volunteers who need less training; “bite-sized” limited-scope opportunities; standalone opportunities that are convenient; streamlining clinics to make them efficient, replicable, and scalable; training staff for how to work with pro bono attorneys; and more.

Program Highlight

Inland Counties Legal Services (ICLS): Expansion of limited scope services into new substantive areas.

ICLS has a relatively new pro bono program that has been built up rather quickly. Launched in the past few years, the pro bono team supervises a range of projects in areas of law where ICLS did not generally provide services before, like small business and nonprofit assistance, LGBTQ+ services including name/gender marker change, guardianship, and record clearing. After beginning the program with new substantive areas, ICLS is now utilizing pro bono to amplify work where there is a current need (immigration), and expand upon the expertise of ICLS' staff, as in systemic litigation. The pro bono team is careful to not push pro bono in areas where it does not work, but they are creative in utilizing volunteers where it does work; for instance, their public benefits team works with medical students to review medical records in disability benefits cases.

At the same time, the new focus on pro bono has increased the funding for ICLS. After seeing the impact on clients and becoming acquainted with the work, ICLS partner firms have been more likely to contribute to the organization and support events through sponsorships. With increased frequency, partners also generously cover costs the organization cannot, like filing fees for clients. ICLS is currently working on a project to identify additional measures of success for the pro bono program. For instance, they are seeing repeat clients, indicating client satisfaction with services. They are also seeing that their responsiveness to community needs has reaped positive benefits.

The organization has a funder requirement (through LSC, 12% PAI) to engage in pro bono, but they have received other funding specifically for pro bono that has allowed for the growth of their team, the integration of pro bono into their strategic plan and program staff job descriptions, and friend-raising in terms of supporters and board members.

VI. Update on California Pro Bono Portal³³

The California Pro Bono Portal was launched in January 2024, aiming to connect volunteers with pro bono opportunities throughout the state. After a little over a year, the Portal is:

- An integral part of the state's pro bono ecosystem;
- A bridge across the justice gap in the state's "legal deserts;"
- A user-friendly tool for volunteers to find the best match for their time and talent;
- A method to instill pro bono habits in law students – the lawyers of tomorrow; and
- A data source that will inform LSOs and the legal aid community of the best way to engage the private bar in pro bono service.

The Portal has become an integral part of California's pro bono ecosystem. There are 38 Legal Services Organizations and over 1,700 volunteers registered on the Portal. Some of the registrants are law firm pro bono partners or coordinators, representing hundreds of potential volunteers, so the actual number of potential volunteers who may be matched through the Portal is even higher. LSOs have posted over 400 pro bono opportunities, many of which are on-going clinics or projects serving large numbers of clients. Opportunities cover over 20 substantive practice areas.

Statewide stakeholders are engaged with the Portal. The State Bar includes a module on the Portal in its new attorney materials and includes the Portal in its Pro Bono Resources web page. The California Lawyers Association lauds the Portal as a "safe and centralized statewide platform to view opportunities posted by approved entities." The Portal and the Pro Bono Training Institute will provide suggestions and links for volunteers to view opportunities on the Portal related to PBTI trainings completed and to find PBTI trainings that complement appealing Portal opportunities. LAAC and OneJustice are supporting Portal outreach and system enhancements this year. And, importantly, the Disaster Legal Assistance Collaborative refers volunteers to the Portal, helping to streamline the process of bringing assistance to those in need.

One of the primary goals of the Portal is to bring pro bono lawyers to California's rural and mountainous communities, which are often defined as "legal deserts" due to the dearth of attorneys in them. The Portal includes pro bono opportunities covering the entire state, allowing lawyers in urban areas to provide pro bono services to underserved communities.

An example of the Portal's success in bridging this justice gap is seen when a global law firm with no offices in an LSO's mostly rural service area learned about the LSO's remote estate planning clinics on the Portal. The law firm staffed two clinics for that LSO and plans to continue. In addition, the law firm's volunteers enjoyed the work so much that the law firm's pro bono coordinator sought out another LSO in a rural area on the Portal to explore remote pro bono estate planning opportunities with them.

The Portal is a useful tool for lawyers from large and small firms, in urban and rural areas, and with many types of substantive expertise. As of May 4, 2025, the Portal had over 1,700 volunteers registered, from 467 Zip codes, in 35 of the 58 California counties (this only reflects California volunteers; there are also out-of-state volunteers). For large law firms, the Portal assists the pro bono partner or coordinator by providing a mechanism for lawyers to

search for and propose opportunities of interest to them. Law firms who choose to do so are able to direct any attorney expression of interest in a posted opportunity to the firm's pro bono partner for review and approval. For small firms or solo practitioners, the Portal serves as a "pro bono coordinator," opening up opportunities that they would otherwise be unaware of. No longer will attorneys be limited to pro bono service for LSOs in their own community, which may or may not have an opportunity suited to them. Through the Portal, attorneys will find the best match for their interests and the amount of time they have to volunteer.


Nearly 75% (1,289) of the registered volunteers are attorneys. But nearly 10% (148) are law students. 11% (49) of the posted opportunities are available to law students. Providing pro bono opportunities to law students instills the "pro bono" habit in them as they graduate and begin their legal careers. Law students who are successful using the Portal are likely to continue using it in the future.

Data gleaned from the Portal provides insights into trends in volunteer interest and selection of opportunities, providing insights for the legal aid community in crafting pro bono projects and opportunities. For example, it is interesting to note that the subjects that volunteers state they are interested in at registration has little correlation with the subjects that volunteers actually express interest in. This indicates that once on the Portal, volunteers are open to other types of service. LSOs may not need to focus on volunteers' stated intentions but can feel more confident that their actual clients' needs as expressed in their posted opportunities will be met, even if the subject area isn't "popular" with volunteers at the time of registration.

Unsurprisingly, discrete clinics and remote opportunities receive more volunteer interest than cases or in-person commitments. Given this, LSOs will need to think creatively about how they present their opportunities and about how pro bono service that has traditionally been in-person might be provided remotely.

As the Portal embarks on its second year, enhancements to its capabilities are underway, with the support of a grant from the California Access to Justice Commission. It is exciting to contemplate the growth and possibility of providing legal services to those in need through the Portal.

Reflecting on what is possible, one LSO based in a region with relatively few attorneys or law students, and significant legal desert areas, has used the Portal to connect with volunteers from across California to support low-income clients in their community. These connections



have helped the LSO expand support in complex, underserved areas of law such as trusts and estates and small business transactional matters, as well as in high-demand areas like expungement—services that would otherwise be difficult to offer locally at scale.

“The Portal has been essential to ICLS’s overall pro bono strategy to expand our network of volunteers to meet the legal needs of our region,” said Matt Kugizaki, Pro Bono Director at Inland Counties Legal Services. “It has helped us bring in skilled volunteers from across the state to serve clients in areas where legal help is scarce—and to do so in ways that are both scalable and sustainable.”

Finally, a grant from the California Access to Justice Commission will support technological enhancements to the Portal, along with the development of toolkits and other resources to help LSOs across the state replicate successful models, share best practices, and integrate the Portal into their broader pro bono strategies.

VII. Takeaways and Conclusion

The goal of this survey and report is to create a baseline. To understand what pro bono legal services looked like in 2024, so that we can see the impact of any interventions—both good and bad—on pro bono in future years. This report is being released at a defining moment for pro bono legal services across the country. Initially, the goal was to release the report just as two primary pro bono initiatives were being launched—the pro bono portal and the pro bono reporting requirement. However, the new federal administration’s Executive Orders targeting law firms, and specifically targeting their pro bono work, has shifted some of the positive momentum initially contemplated.

The pro bono network in California is strong. There are many legal services organizations that utilize pro bono volunteers at varying levels of engagement and expertise. Three quarters of California attorneys have provided pro bono services in their careers, and in 2022, just under half of all California attorneys provided pro bono services, translating to about 88,000 hours of pro bono services. Even with disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic, the changes in federal administrations, and economic disruptions, pro bono work remains an essential component of achieving access to justice in California. The consistent support for pro bono

legal services in California remains.

There are a few takeaways from this report that we can use to guide our pro bono work going forward. We are clear that strategies to increase and create efficiencies in pro bono legal services must vary based on organization type, geography, substantive law, and other characteristics. While one takeaway may work well for one organization, that same takeaway may be entirely ineffective or unhelpful for another organization.

The pro bono staffing at legal services organizations varies greatly, and relatedly, so does the specific funding for pro bono work. However, the size of a legal services organization's pro bono staff does not directly correlate to more hours or more volunteers. Much depends on the structure of the legal services organization. Organizations that are smaller and more focused on a single type of case (i.e., family law appeals) tend to be able to integrate pro bono legal services more smoothly into their day-to-day work, and with more stability in number of volunteers and hours from year to year. Organizations that are larger—and/or that provide broad civil legal services—tend to see more fluctuation in the number of pro bono hours and pro bono volunteers.

Some larger organizations have created smaller, more focused pro bono legal services within substantive projects, sometimes even having a program staff specifically tasked with supporting pro bono volunteers in a particular substantive area. Aligning their pro bono programs this way has allowed those legal services organizations to spend less energy and effort recruiting pro bono volunteers for case types that are less likely to be successful.

Legal services organizations acknowledge the burden of training - both of volunteers and of their staff to work with volunteers. It takes substantial resources to offer the training the organizations feel is necessary to ensure their volunteers can provide high quality legal services. There are some statewide resources for volunteer training, but there is still a need for more, as well as a need for training staff at legal services organizations on how to best work with pro bono volunteers.

Organizations are beginning to adopt technology tools that increase their ability to serve clients. These technology tools are being used internally, to create efficiencies for staff, externally with volunteers, and externally directly for their clients. When technology is being used, as the products become more financially accessible and user friendly, organizations report a positive impact on the pro bono volunteers and clients. The pro bono portal is a very

obvious example of this! There are many ways in which technology can continue to be improved and more effectively utilized, particularly in streamlining the processes involved in providing pro bono legal services, evaluating the impact of pro bono legal services, and surveying stakeholders, especially clients.

More volunteers are opting for limited-scope or unbundled services, as opposed to full-scope representation. That shift creates challenges for legal services organizations, especially those that do not use clinics or limited scope services as their primary service delivery model or at all. It also is problematic because research has shown that full-scope representation is most effective in helping clients achieve positive legal outcomes, so legal services organizations are left determining how to best utilize pro bono volunteers, while still providing the most effective legal services to their clients.

Organizations have broadened the ways in which they work with volunteers. In the past, the focus really was on full-scope representation. Organizations are now utilizing volunteers for administrative work like answering hotline phone calls, conducting intakes, and translation/interpretation, as well as for know your rights presentations to client populations, training staff and other volunteers, and for research projects that may or may not be connected to a specific case. The expansion of types of volunteer opportunities could be in response to changing volunteer interests, but also could be representative of the changing needs of the client populations and the organizations.

This report will inform legal services organizations, pro bono volunteers (including law firms, corporations, law schools, and others), policy makers, and others who advocate for, engage in, and care about pro bono legal services. It will also inform a cohort program that we are launching at the same time that this report is published, geared towards supporting legal services organizations as they work through challenges to and opportunities within their pro bono programs. We hope that the cohort will be able to utilize the data collected in this report to inform decisions they make about their programs. And that with this cohort, and future innovations by legal services organizations, when this survey is repeated in the future, we may see a shift in the data, with a continued focus on providing the best possible services to the client communities.

RESEARCH TEAM

Leigh Ferrin, OneJustice, lferrin@one-justice.org

Zach Newman, Legal Aid Association of California, znewman@laaconline.org

Miguel Martinez, OneJustice, mmartinez@one-justice.org

1. See, e.g., American Bar Assoc., Pro Bono Reporting, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/probono_public_service/policy/arguments/.
2. AB 2505: Attorneys: pro bono legal services (2024), https://calmatters.digitaldemocracy.org/bills/ca_202320240ab2505.
3. American Bar Assoc (ABA) Standing Comm. on Pro Bono and Public Service, *Supporting Justice V: A Report on the Pro Bono Work of America's Lawyers 1* (2025).
4. *Id.* (in the survey year of 2022).
5. *Id.* 1–2.
6. *Id.* at 2.
7. *Id.*
8. *Id.*
9. State Bar of California, 2024 Justice Gap Study (2025) (using data from *supra* note 3, ABA).
10. *Id.*
11. *Id.*
12. *Id.*
13. *Id.*
14. *Id.*
15. *Id.*
16. *Id.*
17. *Id.*
18. LAAC and OneJustice Request_2020-2023 Pro Bono and Volunteer Data, State Bar of California (requested fall 2024), on file with LAAC. This is utilized for this whole section (B.i.–iii).
19. Inclusive of those who receive the Pro Bono Allocation funding directed at legal aid nonprofits that utilize pro bono as a core service delivery component. See FN 4.
20. Generally, these organizations are those that receive the “pro bono allocation” from the State Bar, given the fact that they so heavily rely on pro bono to provide legal services in their communities. See Grants, State Bar of California, <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/Access-to-Justice/Grants>.
21. *Supra* note 2.
22. *Id.*
23. Pro Bono Institute, *2024 Report on the Law Firm Pro Bono Project Staffing Survey*, <https://www.probonoinst.org/wp-content/uploads/Report-on-2024-Staffing-Survey.pdf>, page 5.
24. *Id.* at page 9.
25. *Id.* at page 10.
26. *Id.* at page 11.
27. *Id.* at page 12.
28. *Id.* at page 22.
29. *Id.* at page 18.
30. *Id.* at page 19.
31. *Id.* at page 14.
32. We did not survey organizations regarding why they were seeing increases or decreases in regard to total volunteers, which could be a helpful question for future iterations of such a survey.
33. California Pro Bono Portal Advisory Committee: Jenni Gomez-Haddad (Legal Services of Northern California), Matthew Kugizaki and Mahum Shere Asef (Inland Counties Legal Services), & Shawn Joost (Central California Legal Services).
34. State Bar of California, *supra* note 9.