

Attorney Devin Bates Discusses What Drives His Dedication to Pro-Bono Service

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Last fall, Attorney Devin Bates was honored with the Outstanding Pro Bono Service Award in the large firm category at the Arkansas Access to Justice Month Kickoff event. The event was organized by the Arkansas Access to Justice Commission to celebrate October as Access to Justice Month in Arkansas. He was honored for providing an outstanding level of pro bono service demonstrated by his commitment to assist underserved populations in Arkansas.

Devin is a man dedicated to pro bono service. He's tackling pro bono work, actively recruiting other attorneys, particularly associates, to engage in work on his pro bono cases and he's provided 541 hours of pro bono service in the past three years. We had a conversation with Devin about what drives his commitment to pro bono service. Here's what he shared.

Describe pro bono work in practical terms. Pro bono work is legal advice or representation provided to individuals, non-profits, or community groups, free of charge by legal professionals. In some instances, it means being appointed by a judge to prosecute a case from inception through trial. For lawyers who may not have the time or ability to handle pro bono cases for full representation, there are many time-limited, discrete opportunities to engage. For example, Mitchell Williams has sponsored and sent volunteer pro bono attorneys to work with the Delta Initiative. Through this one-day service opportunity, our attorneys participated alongside law students in a criminal record sealing clinic in Pine Bluff to commemorate Constitution Day. Having provided pro bono services through both of these avenues, I can attest to the fact that both are meaningful ways to give back, and both are needed. There are pro bono opportunities equally suitable for litigators and transactional lawyers, and there are ways to give back that require no prior substantive legal experience.

Why do you participate in pro bono work? The need for pro bono legal services across the State of Arkansas is tremendous. I lived in the Delta for four years and worked as an educator confronting the historical and growing inequities that exist within many of our systems, including the education and justice systems. Through that work I was sometimes subpoenaed to court, and while there I saw a lack of access to justice unfolding before me. Legal rights can lose their meaning without access to justice to enforce those rights. As a lawyer, I now have an opportunity to do my small part in filling that need.

What do you gain from pro bono work? I've used pro bono to do meaningful work, develop new skills, and provide opportunities for newer attorneys in our office to get hands-on experience. Through pro bono representation you can work on a case that is squarely in your comfort zone, or you can do something you've never done before and build new skills, and there is equal value to both. For example, through pro bono representation I have spent significant time engaging in constitutional litigation,

applying my skills as a trial lawyer to more interest-driven ends such as fighting for first amendment rights of those that cannot afford representation but nonetheless have meaningful claims.

How does Mitchell Williams support attorneys in their pro bono work? Mitchell Williams is committed to pro bono work in foundational and meaningful ways. This firm gives its attorneys credit for pro bono work by counting pro bono hours in the calculation of billable hours. This means that when it comes time to compensate and promote attorneys, the pro bono hours are included and considered as if they are hours of legal work performed for paying clients. By treating pro bono work in this way, Mitchell Williams puts its “money where its mouth is.” I'm proud to practice with attorneys who take pro bono work seriously.

What is your vision for the future of pro bono work? We could go a long way in simultaneously meeting unmet legal needs and developing the skills of new lawyers by encouraging those fresh out of law school to undertake pro bono work. I've talked with lawyers from other countries whose legal systems require a year of pro bono or low pay public interest law practice as an intermediate step between law school and law practice. Such systems offer an example from which we can find inspiration and create opportunities.