

LAUNCH OF PRO BONO PRACTICES – A GUIDE TO THE PRO BONO
PRACTICES OF NSW'S LARGEST LAW FIRMS.

13 DECEMBER 2007

This is a project commenced in 2005 by NSW Young Lawyers, particularly Rebecca Ordish and Peter Dean who saw a need to prepare a guide that compared and contrasted the pro bono programs of the larger firms, particularly for law students that wanted to join a firm that had an active pro bono program and culture.

A lot of work was done towards this end in 2005 and 2006 but didn't lead to production of a guide - largely due to key volunteers in the project going overseas.

The National Pro Bono Resource Centre has been supportive of the project since its inception and noticed that it had faltered. It offered the services of its 2 social justice interns in second semester this year, who work at the Centre as part of a subject offered by the UNSW Law faculty.

This offer was gratefully accepted by NSW Young Lawyers and Hai-Van Nguyen and Sonya Redman, two final year UNSW law students, have been working since July this year to bring the Guide through to the published form that I launch today.

So I would like to thank them and all the others that have been involved in putting this guide together. Davyd Wong from Young Lawyers deserves special mention for steering the project through from outset to completion. I would also like to thank the sponsors who have covered the printing costs for the Guide: Freehills, Sparke Helmore, Deacons and Arnold Bloch Leibler.

Students

The contribution by the Centre is part of a broader aim to raise awareness of the pro bono ethos among law students and young lawyers. This is one of its priority areas for this year and I would now like to talk about this and other priority areas of the Centre.

The Centre has in the past 18 months prepared two papers for the Council of Australian Law Deans (CALD) advocating the adoption of a policy about pro bono and law students. The Centre is now working on a draft policy for CALD with Michael Adams Head, School of Law at UWS for consideration and possible adoption at CALD's next meeting to be held in April 2008 at UNSW.

The Pro Bono Students Australia program trial, which was started by the Centre in 2006 at the University of Western Sydney, now has 17 students placed. This is a program where law students are placed externally doing 'law related' work often in a non government organisation for a semester. While they receive no academic credit for the placement, they gain valuable law related community service experience and contacts.

In July 2007 the Centre took over coordination of the UNSW Public Interests Internship Program which placed 12 students this semester and is already full with 20 students placed for first semester next year. The Centre is happy to hear from firms or other organisations that can offer a 'Public Interest' placement.

Meeting Needs of Indigenous Legal Organisations

Another priority of the centre this year is to address the needs of Indigenous legal organisations and explore the possibilities for pro bono assistance and matchmaking.

In October the Centre organised a relationship building event between representatives of Sydney based firms and all the senior lawyers from the NSW/ACT ATSIL who were in Sydney for a meeting hosted by law firm Middletons. The event involved discussion in a social setting between the ALS's senior lawyers and representatives from the 8 law firms who attended and has led to new assistance being provided to the NSW/ACT Aboriginal Legal Service by at least three of those firms.

Moving out of NSW for a moment as a national centre must do, over the past five months, a scheme has been brokered by the Centre between the Western Australian

Aboriginal Legal Service, the Victorian Bar Criminal Law Association and the Victorian Bar Legal Assistance Scheme (VBLAS) to support the WA ALS with excess criminal work arising from a new police task force in WA that has been investigating sexual assault cases in remote Aboriginal communities. 20 Victorian barristers including 2 QCs have volunteered to help out by agreeing to work in remote parts of WA with these cases. VBLAS managed by PILCH in Victoria will coordinate the scheme.

Conduct a national survey of the legal profession and its pro bono activities.

Another priority of the Centre this year has been to conclude its national survey of the legal profession that it has been conducting for the past two years. The individual solicitor's survey report has been finalised and will be published in February 2008. The barrister's surveys have been completed in all States and Territories except Queensland and Tasmania and the firm's survey will be rolled out in February 2008.

Survey results will (optional):

- provide information to the public about the great contribution that lawyers make to helping those in need.
- provide information to government about the pro bono contribution that lawyers make (in particular areas of practice) to help them to develop policy and set funding levels for legal aid services.
- raise the visibility amongst lawyers of the professional obligation of lawyers to undertake pro bono work, and encourage others to do so by providing models of good practice.
- provide information which may lead to improved accessibility to pro bono services for those who need them; and
- identify barriers and constraints to the delivery of pro bono legal services with a view to reducing or removing these.

Address Barriers

An ongoing task for the Centre is to identify, address and advocate change to systemic issues that would make it easier or more productive for the legal profession to provide pro bono legal services.

This year one issue the Centre has focussed on is the insurance and practising certificate barriers that face in-house lawyers who want to undertake pro bono work. The Centre has been working with DLA Phillips Fox to negotiate an insurance policy that will provide professional indemnity insurance cover for any in-house lawyer who wishes to undertake pro bono work on a project notified to the Centre and listed in a schedule to the policy. Once this is in place the Centre will be seeking to have all Law Societies make available a practising certificate for in-house lawyers that authorises them to undertake pro bono work.

Improved information flow

The last priority of the Centre this year that I will mention is that of improving information flow to the legal profession and the public about pro bono legal practice in Australia and internationally.

I will briefly mention four activities here:

Firstly, from this month the Centre is now publishing its free e-newsletter 'The National Pro Bono News' with increased content and published monthly rather than bi-monthly. If you are not on the subscription list please just go to the Centre's website and subscribe by entering your email address there. If you have story you want told, or to let people know about an interesting job, contact the Centre.

Secondly, the Centre has been building an enhanced website that will be launched in February 2008.

Thirdly, Centre Director, John Corker will be giving presentations in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane in February next year on the 'UK "pro bono **movement**"' as they call it, after having just attended National Pro Bono Week in the UK, spoken at their National

Pro Bono Conference and attended many meetings. He has, I believe come back with some new ideas which he is keen to share with you.

Fourthly, I would like to mention the second Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference 2008, jointly organised by the Centre and the Law Council of Australia will be held in Sydney on the 14th and 15th November 2008. The theme for the conference will be “Working Together”. An organising committee consisting of Anne Cregan from Blake Dawson Waldron, Richard Funston from NSW Legal Aid, Jo Schulman from the Disability Discrimination Legal Centre, Bridget Sordo from the NSW Law Society, barristers Chris Whitelaw and Chris Winslow and Centre Director John Corker has been created so if you have any ideas for the conference please contact one of the committee members.

That’s enough about the Centre. WE are here tonight to celebrate the production of this valuable resource, the Guide to the Pro Bono Practices of 22 of NSW’s largest firms that will be distributed in the new year to all final year law students in the law schools of NSW but please help yourself to a copy tonight.

NSW Young Lawyers and the Centre will work during 2008 to see if this Guide can be published in 2009 as a national guide. Many of the firms contained in it have national practices and national pro bono coordinators so it shouldn’t be that difficult.

Thank you all for coming along tonight. Thank you to our hosts, Freehills and best wishes for the Christmas season.