

# Innovative Approach to Pro Bono: The Law Student “Alternabreak”

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The institution of the 50-Hour Pro Bono Requirement for all New York bar admittees in 2015 sparked numerous creative service opportunities across New York State, including remote research, client intake via videoconference, and service field trips. Short on time and eager for practical experience, many law students are turning to the “alternabreak” to capitalize on pro bono hours, maximize client interaction, and develop practice ready skills in a condensed time frame. These public service trips transport students outside their law-school bubble and provide them a chance to directly impact a community in need.

Two upstate organizations, Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) and Legal Assistance of Western New York, Inc. (LawNY®) became early adopters of the “alternabreak” in the first week of September, 2017 when eight Stanford Law students traveled to Upstate NY



*Connecting with the Steuben County Bar Association*

and spent two weeks learning about access to justice and sharing their talents. Michaela Azemi, regional pro bono coordinator at LawNY®, and Gayle Murphy, pro bono manager at VLP, collaborated to develop a detailed schedule of training, service, courtroom observation, client-interviewing, and interaction with the local private bar and the judiciary. The stu-

dents spent one week in rural offices at LawNY® and one urban week in Buffalo at VLP. The students, working in small groups, focused on three separate areas of practice for the duration of the trip at each agency: Family Law, Housing, and Community Development.

Organizing this cross-country “alternabreak” involved not only program development, event planning, and juggling attorney court schedules to plan a worthwhile trip for law students but it also required cultivating buy-in from staff at each agency. We spent time attempting to convince our staff that the benefits would outweigh the cost in this beta-test for a new wave of law student volunteer involvement.



*Learning valuable lessons from Hon. Lawrence J. Vilardo, District Judge of the Western District of New York State*

At the conclusion of the two week trip, students met with both organizations for a combined debriefing session. The results were far more impactful than anticipated. In just two short weeks, law students drafted memoranda and motions, researched legal issues on individual cases and broader reforms, observed settlement conferences and court hearings, met

with judges and interacted with community leaders. We estimate that the students provided our organizations with over 600 hours of volunteer service during the two weeks. Feedback from both organizations’ staff attorneys included awe and appreciation for the quality of assistance provided on several cases in such a limited time frame.

The students shared that although many had taken a poverty law class and learned of “the average American’s seven unmet needs,” the statistics meant very little before actually meeting a client facing eviction who was also requesting assistance sorting out a will, negotiating a foreclosure with the bank, and filing for a restraining order from an abusive

partner. They had memorable firsthand experiences working with clients facing a “waterfall of need” for civil legal services in both locations. They developed a greater understanding of the enormous need for increased civil legal services for low income New Yorkers facing a myriad of legal problems. We were pleased to confirm

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that one of the successful outcomes for the students was the exposure to new communities and diverse clients across the country, which increases law student cultural competency and develops more effective attorneys.

This two-week experience also gave the law students an opportunity to connect with and observe the interplay between public interest attorneys and their private bar colleagues. One of the students, Carly Hite, noted that students may have had differing career paths, but that the “alternabreak” experience gave each a new perspective. In the debrief, she explained that “a few of us that will practice in the private bar now want to ensure that our future firms are connected with local legal services agencies and those of us who will practice in the public interest, now recognize the importance of network-



*Working in a LawNY® rural office in Bath, NY*

ing and maintaining positive relationships with the private bar to ensure that as many of our clients as possible receive the help they need at a quality they deserve.” It is evident that the short service trip transformed into a sustainable pipeline for each organization of empathetic future pro bono attorneys.

The Stanford Law students left an indelible mark on both organizations by reenergizing staff desire to pursue access to justice and civil legal advocacy for those in need. In a field susceptible to burnout, the motivational boost from the law students’ energy was as inspiring as a keynote speaker at a statewide conference. For exam-

ple, one staff bankruptcy attorney had the opportunity to explain his role to the visiting students as an advocate for people attempting to climb out of a financial hole, often caused by catastrophic illness or unexpected job loss. He passionately described the reality for low-income people facing bankruptcy, and how without repre-



*Touring Buffalo City Hall*



*Meeting with Daniel Marren, Confidential Law Clerk to the Hon. Paula L. Feroleto, Administrative Judge, 8th Judicial District, and Court Officer Daniel Milligan.*

sentation the law would continue to be more punitive than appropriate for the average individual. This attorney’s words lit a fire in the students and in turn, reinvigorated the host organization’s bankruptcy practice.

In another instance, the students assigned to the community development projects at each organization observed “attorneys assisting in holistic, proactive work, such as forming nonprofits and provide job training,

lobbying for land trusts, and create educational opportunities for youth” and as a result, planned to spread these innovative community lawyering practices into their communities. Similarly, the community development attorneys at VLP and LawNY® expressed gratitude for the legal work the students accomplished and its significant impact on their cases. The staff responses were entirely positive and the “alternabreak” experience proved to be capacity building in so many ways for each organization.

The groundwork to develop and implement this “alternabreak” was definitely worth the effort. Expected goals for both the law students and the organizations were surpassed. This group of eight talented, committed and fascinating law students left our programs with a greater understanding of the importance of our work to meet the civil legal needs of

our low income clients. They also reenergized our staff, reminding us of our passion and commitment to access to justice initiatives.

If your organization is interested in hosting law students for an “alternabreak” or if you are a law school in search of a host organization, please reach out to Gayle Murphy, Esq. at gmur-

phy@ecbavlp.com and Michaela Rossettie Azemi, Esq. at mazemi@lawny.org for tips, tricks and templates. Many thanks to the incredible Stanford Law Students, Jonathan Berry-Smith, Drew Flood, Lauren Gorodetsky, Carly Hite, David Huang, Ann Niehaus, Sarah Rowan, and Brittany Riley, for their remarkable pro bono work, insightful feedback, and boundless enthusiasm for civil legal services.