

t h i r t e e n t h j u d i c i a l
c i r c u i t ' s p r o b o n o c o m m i t t e e

The Value of an Hour in the World of Pro Bono Service

In the world of billable hours, I often ask myself, "What is an hour of my time really worth?"

I recently had my first pro bono experience as an attorney. I left the office an hour before my normal departure time and headed to the George E. Edgecomb Courthouse. I had committed myself to helping with Bay Area Legal Services client intake. It was the most hectic week of my legal career to date.

Driving to the courthouse, I couldn't help but wish I had billed one more hour. But, it wasn't until I left the courthouse that I realized the true value of my time.

As a student at Stetson University College of Law, I learned to give back to the community. Four years later, as a first-year associate, it is easy to get caught up in the race to make partner and lose sight of the fundamental purpose of my profession — to help people.

It was my second client intake that really opened my eyes to the value of an hour. The client was seeking what I considered a "simple" divorce. No kids. No property. No alimony. He wanted to move on with his life, but he needed Bay Area Legal Services' help to do so. I asked him some questions, listened to his story, and told him I would come back shortly with some advice.

I'm a civil litigator; I don't practice family law. Nevertheless, I immediately thought this was something he could do himself, that he did not need a lawyer for this simple matter. It was then that I realized the power of my law degree and the invaluable ability it gave me to change someone's life in an hour.

I went to the Bay Area Legal Services attorneys to discuss the client's divorce. I was seventh in line. What I told the client would take a few minutes actually took an hour ("1.0" in the world of billable hours). I impatiently watched the minutes tick by

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and considered all of the things I could be doing at the office. The client sat patiently awaiting my advice. He didn't live in six-minute intervals.

I returned to the client an hour later, apologizing for the delay. He looked at me eagerly, anticipating my advice and praying we could help.

We could help.

I conveyed the good news and told him we would attempt to set him up with a volunteer lawyer to assist with his divorce. The joy on his face spoke volumes.

Feeling good about what I had done and the time I had spent, I shook his hand and started to walk away. I heard him say, "Well worth the hour wait." I smiled to myself, knowing that extra billable hour lost at the office was more than recaptured at the courthouse. I immediately volunteered to take on this client's divorce in what I hope will be my first of many pro bono cases.



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