

## Pro Bono – Law Firms

# The Benefits Of A Coordinated And Focused Pro Bono Program

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WILLIAMS KASTNER

Most law firms and legal departments support pro bono work in some way. Williams Kastner has long encouraged and supported pro bono work. Historically, our attorneys have each pursued projects and causes of their own choosing. A few years ago, however, our firm made a decision to focus our collective pro bono efforts by forming a strategic relationship with the Northwest Immigrants Rights Project ([www.nwirp.org](http://www.nwirp.org)), a non-profit organization devoted to helping low income immigrants and refugees. This decision has led to a much more effective pro bono program—one with greater impact and rewards for Williams Kastner, the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project and its clients.

The NWIRP refers clients to Williams Kastner for assistance with either an affirmative asylum application or defensive removal proceedings initiated by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). Over the past 36 months, our attorneys have helped immigrants from all over the world to obtain asylum. The clients referred to us by NWIRP have included people from Haiti, Kenya, Burma, Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Gambia, Venezuela and Ethiopia. Many of these immigrants fled their countries after having been kidnapped, tortured and in some cases imprisoned as a result of their political beliefs and their efforts to effect peaceful change in their countries.

Our clients' stories are difficult for most Americans to comprehend or imagine. One vivid example is a Haitian client who was kidnapped after he spoke out on the radio against the government. His kidnapers beat him with a baseball bat. He was released only after his family paid a large ransom, and then he needed emergency surgery to repair a rupture in his stomach wall caused by the repeated severe beatings. Atrocities such as these are fairly common among the immigrants who come to the NWIRP seeking relief and a road to a safe harbor.

Many of the women from Africa who come to the NWIRP for assistance were subjected by their own families to genital mutilation and forced plural marriage. One young woman from Gambia fled to the United States at the age of 20 because she had been repeatedly whipped and beaten by her father, uncles and cousins for her refusal to become the third wife of a 70-year-old man. Her father had arranged for the plural marriage and insisted that she marry this

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**The Williams Kastner NWIRP pro bono team, from left to right: Arissa Peterson, Darren Feider, Megan Pedersen, Dana Ferestien, Claire Hur, Roberto Soto.**

man even though she loved a young man whom she had met on her own. Our clients are victims of societies where the fundamental concepts of freedom and human rights do not apply.

Another NWIRP client our lawyers worked with and were able to help is from Azerbaijan—he had repeatedly suffered ethnically motivated attacks due to his Armenian ancestry. Our client fled Azerbaijan in the late 1980s when the Soviet Union came apart and the ethnic Azerbaijanis sought to wipe out the large ethnic Armenian population in Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan. He initially moved to the Ukraine, but he did not find any better conditions; he and his family were repeatedly attacked by Neo-Nazis.

All of these people came to the United States in search of safety, dignity and peace. Representing them for no fee is the right thing to do for the simple reason that it allows Williams Kastner and our attorneys to contribute to our community and to be personally rewarded by helping those in genuine desperate need to start a better life. Our lawyers utilize considerable legal and litigation skills to make an enormous difference in the lives of these people. I will always remember a client suddenly hugging me at the end of his hearing, when the immigration judge told him that he was granting asylum. With tears in his eyes, the client told me, “Thank you! You have saved my life.”

Many of the associates from Williams Kastner who have invested their time and skills in the NWIRP pro bono project have similar stories to share about the successes achieved on behalf of their clients. The very tangible results of our work with these clients make us all very proud to be attorneys and members of a firm such as Williams Kastner. This is particularly important at a time when many law firms around the United States are struggling to attract and retain talented, qualified and diverse associates. Interesting and challenging pro bono work like this can be one of the non-economic factors critical to attorneys looking for an organization to join. The personal fulfillment and professional growth associates gain through a

firm's commitment to community service in pro bono projects is incomparable.

Williams Kastner's work with the NWIRP has been beneficial in many other ways in large part because the firms has supported it through a collective effort that has involved everyone from the firm's most senior members (partners) to its youngest and newest attorneys. Earlier this year, a 35-year member of the firm took on his first NWIRP client. The senior member worked with his daughter who had just graduated from law school to represent, and obtain asylum for, an Ethiopian man who had been jailed for his activities as a political organizer. While this senior member has done other pro bono work in the past, it was our established program with the NWIRP that created this rewarding and interesting opportunity.

Many of Williams Kastner's first- and second-year associates, as well as our summer associates, have teamed up with members and senior associates to represent our NWIRP clients. We have purposefully staffed files this way to promote mentoring and collegiality, and to allow newer attorneys to develop their client relations, file management and oral advocacy skills with guidance and input from more experienced attorneys. It has also ensured that young attorneys become active in pro bono work early in their careers.

Asylum clients often present significant challenges in our work due to language and cultural barriers and challenges—English is rarely a primary language and much of our work is aided by translators. In addition, these clients have endured hardships rarely, if ever, encountered in the United States. By learning to manage these client relationships, our young attorneys are “ahead of the curve” on key practice and client relationship skills. Similarly, these engagements have allowed our newest attorneys to conduct trials in their first year of practice. In most law firm settings, this would not be possible because most clients require that more senior attorneys conduct any trials and hearings on their behalf.

When Williams Kastner established

this strategic relationship with the NWIRP, our firm had only a few attorneys with significant immigration law experience. We quickly changed this and learned the fundamentals and nuances of immigration law through a training program, presented to us by the NWIRP. We secured this initial resource and assistance by committing to take multiple cases—we now have more than a dozen attorneys who have successfully represented clients in immigration proceedings. For new attorneys joining the firm and becoming involved in the pro bono program, we have experienced attorneys who serve as an in-house training resource in the area of immigration law.

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Williams Kastner has also received greater recognition for our pro bono work because our efforts are more concentrated and coordinated. Last year, after having obtained asylum for nearly a dozen clients, the NWIRP presented Williams Kastner with its Amicus Award for “extraordinary contributions” to the organization. The award validated our attorneys' efforts, and we now have more lawyers than ever representing NWIRP clients.

Most law firms have lawyers who pursue and support pro bono work in their communities. Williams Kastner has found that a more coordinated and focused pro bono program yields enormous results for the law firm as well as the organization it supports. Whether the pro bono cause chosen involves immigration, landlord-tenant disputes, child protective services or some other cause, the benefits that such a program offers include:

1. increased early opportunities for new attorneys to develop key practice skills and to gain experience in court and working directly with clients;
2. wider participation of attorneys across the organization;
3. high attorney morale by allowing attorneys to work together to support a cause in which they believe;
4. additional resources for attorney education and training regarding the substantive areas of law involved;
5. more interaction, mentoring and collaboration between senior and junior attorneys;
6. the ability to make a greater difference through a focused and coordinated effort which, in turn, is likely to lead to greater public recognition for the attorneys' pro bono efforts.

The appreciation earned for saving a life exceeds any fees ever earned. An effective pro bono program can yield enormous rewards.

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