AILF INSIGHTS · BUILDING A FIRM

Pro bono and legal aid: what law firms can do

India guarantees free legal aid, but demand far exceeds supply. How law firms of any size can build a meaningful pro bono practice.

Article 39A of the Constitution directs the State to provide free legal aid so that no citizen is denied justice because of economic or other disability. The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 built the machinery: national, State, district and taluk authorities, panels of lawyers and Lok Adalats. Yet anyone who has sat in a district court knows how many people still face the system alone.

Where firms fit

Legal aid in India has rested mainly on individual panel lawyers. Law firms have skills the system lacks: teams, research capacity, drafting discipline and experience in complex matters. A firm does not need to be large to contribute.

Forms of pro bono work

- **Representation** of individuals who qualify for legal aid, through the Legal Services Authorities.
- **Advice clinics** with law colleges or community organisations.
- **Support for non-profits**: registration, governance, contracts and compliance.
- **Legal literacy**: sessions on consumer rights, tenancy, wages, digital fraud and family law.
- **Research support** for public interest matters and law reform.
- **Mentoring** students who run college legal aid clinics.

Building it into the firm

Decide a focus. Choose one or two areas where the firm's skills match local need.

Set a target. A stated number of hours per lawyer each year makes the commitment real.

Treat it as real work. Supervise it, record it and count it in appraisals.

Partner sensibly. Work with the District Legal Services Authority, a law college clinic or a trusted organisation that can identify genuine need.

Mind the rules. Pro bono work must not become a channel for soliciting paid work.

What the firm gains

Young lawyers gain courtroom and client experience earlier than commercial work allows. Teams work together across practice areas. The firm earns standing with the Bench and the community. And lawyers remember why they joined the profession.

What the profession gains

Public confidence. The legal profession is granted a monopoly over representation in court. Service to those who cannot pay is part of what justifies it.

A collective approach

An industry body can match firms with need, especially outside the metros, publish simple guides, and recognise firms and young lawyers who give their time. The Association of Indian Law Firms counts support for young lawyers and a more productive justice system among its initiatives, and pro bono work serves both.

Justice that depends on the ability to pay is incomplete. Every firm can help complete it.

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Read online: https://indianlawfirmsassociation.com/pro-bono-and-legal-aid-role-of-law-firms/

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