



COMMENTARY

From Courtroom to Community

Lessons Learned Outside the Law Office

By Robert N. Holup



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As attorneys, we know how precious our time is. For young lawyers especially, the demands can feel relentless. We balance the steep learning curve of practice with the pressure to prove ourselves, while also dedicating time to building relationships with colleagues and clients. Simultaneously, many of us are starting families, working to maintain friendships, pursuing hobbies, and—somewhere amid it all—get sleep and tend to our own well-being.

Given this reality, the thought of adding another commitment, such as pro bono work or volunteering, might seem impossible. Volunteering often brings to mind long-term obligations or structured commitments, which can seem unmanageable with a calendar already boiling over. But the truth is, volunteering does not have to be all-consuming to be meaningful. And importantly, the benefits go far beyond the simple satisfaction of giving back. For lawyers in particular, volunteering, whether in a legal or non-legal capacity, can reinvigorate your perspective, sharpen your professional skills, and foster connections that enhance both your career and your life outside the office.

My own experience has taught me that service builds skills the courtroom never could. It can strengthen emotional intelligence, improve communication, renew a sense of purpose, and at times, provide valuable, hands-on legal experience. Often, the most meaningful service takes only a few hours—time that pays back dividends in personal growth, professional development, and community impact.

Volunteering is Worth the Time

It is easy to relegate volunteering to the “someday” list, rather than thinking of it as a necessity; it will be a nice gesture to get to once your career slows down, the kids are older, or your inbox is not bursting at the seams. But in the legal profession, where the work can be mentally taxing, emotionally draining, and at times isolating, service outside the office is not just an act of charity, it is a

crucial tool for personal renewal and professional growth.

Volunteering shifts your focus from problems you are paid to solve to the challenges you choose to take on because they matter to you on a different level. In that shift, you rediscover the “human” side of your skills: the listening ear, the empathetic response, the ability to find common ground across differences. These moments can restore a sense of purpose that is easy to lose amid the grind of the legal profession.

It also reintroduces you to the best in people. As most (if not all) of us have experienced, client interactions involve conflict, crisis or damage control. Over time, these day-to-day experiences can profoundly shape the way we see the world, often in a more negative light. Volunteering allows us to meet people who radiate kindness, resilience, and optimism (both fellow volunteers and community members alike). These encounters are refreshing reminders that human decency is alive and well—lifting our mood and fostering positive thinking in both our personal and professional lives.

Community engagement also reconnects us to the very reason many of us went into law in the first place—to help people. That original motivation can easily get lost under contentious adversaries and billable hours, but fortunately a few hours of service can reignite that spark.

The ripple effect should not be underestimated either. A few hours of your time can have a long-lasting impact, not only on the people you serve, but also on the people you work with and potential

clients. When you take the time to invest in something bigger than yourself, people notice. It builds credibility, fosters trust, and positions you as a person of integrity both inside and outside the profession.

Perhaps the most surprising benefit? Volunteering often gives more than it takes. You might show up intending to help someone else, only to leave with a fresh perspective, new connections, and the kind of energy that carries over into your work and personal life. Far from draining your limited time, service can actually make you more effective and grounded in the hours you do spend at the office.

One of the biggest misconceptions about volunteering is that it has to be a major, ongoing commitment. In reality, service is scalable.

For those with packed schedules, small acts still count. That might mean spending an afternoon packing bags at a food pantry, mentoring a law student over coffee, lending your expertise to review a nonprofit’s contract, or organizing a small donation drive for a cause you care about. Even something as simple as sharing a charity’s post on LinkedIn can expand its reach and connect it with new supporters.

A mindset shift from “I don’t have time” to “I can make time” is key. You do not need to do everything, but rather, you just need to do something.

As lawyers, our roles already carry influence. But when we engage in volunteerism, individually and collectively, we amplify that impact. We model civic

engagement for colleagues, clients, and our communities. We strengthen the social fabric by showing that our profession is not only about billable hours, but also about service. A group of young lawyers packing boxes of produce might seem like a small act. But in the hands of those who receive them, those boxes become so much more than simple meals.

Individually, volunteering can make you a more balanced, grounded, and fulfilled person. Collectively, we have the power to move mountains.

Personal Benefits: Recharging Through Service

Take, for example, an afternoon spent helping at a local food bank. The surface benefit might seem purely altruistic—you helped put food on someone's table. But beneath the surface, you have done much more for yourself.

For me, volunteering is intentional; a reset that helps me manage stress and anxiety and break up the grind of legal work. It offers a welcome reprieve from document review, dense legal research or rounds of revisions to a brief. Instead of analyzing statutory language, I might be unloading crates of fresh produce, greeting families at a community event or swinging a hammer on a build site. The tasks may change, but the satisfaction remains immediate and tangible. It lifts my mood, clears mental angst and restores perspective.

Beyond stress relief, these moments build skills we sometimes do not get to practice in the office:

- Enhanced emotional intelligence. You learn to read the room, respond to unspoken needs, and connect with new people from all walks of life.
- Stronger communication skills. Volunteering often puts you in conversations with people who do not speak the “legal language.” Explaining, instructing or simply listening in plain human terms sharpens your

understanding and builds rapport.

- A renewed sense of perspective. It is easy to get consumed by the urgency of our own deadlines. Volunteering reminds us of bigger priorities—health, wellbeing, community, and connection.

Professional Benefits: Service as Skill-Building

While the personal rewards of volunteering are powerful, the professional benefits are just as valuable.

For starters, many of the “soft skills” honed in volunteer work, including empathy, adaptability, and clear communication, translate directly to client interactions, negotiations, and courtroom advocacy. They make you a more relatable, trusted, and persuasive lawyer.

engage with opposing counsel, and appear in court. Similarly, programs like Wills for Heroes pairs direct client interaction (intake and counseling) with substantive drafting, as attorneys prepare wills and related estate-planning documents for first responders, honing both client-service and technical skills.

In both legal and non-legal contexts, showing up consistently builds credibility. As psychologist Dr. Daniel Siegel writes in *The Power of Showing Up*, presence, not perfection, makes the biggest difference in relationships. The same applies to our profession. Being there, even for a few hours, signals commitment, reliability, and care—qualities that reflect well on you as both a person and a professional.



To celebrate Earth Day, members of the Young Lawyers Division volunteered at the Raptor Trust, a nonprofit dedicated to rehabilitating injured birds of prey.

Volunteering can also give you practical, hands-on legal experience in ways that traditional casework may not. For example, serving as pro bono counsel in a landlord-tenant matter not only deepens your knowledge of a new area of law, but also offers opportunities to learn how to manage an individual client,

If you are asking, “How am I going to figure this out?” don’t worry. Pro bono organizations provide support and training, and I have found that other attorneys who have handled similar pro bono assignments are happy to share guidance and mentorship. It is far less daunting than it appears.



The Young Lawyers Division wrapped up a summer of service by lending a hand with Habitat for Humanity in Greater Middlesex and Morris. The organization builds affordable housing for low-and moderate-income families.

Young Lawyers Division in Action

I have been fortunate to volunteer with my peers in the Young Lawyers Division (YLD) on a range of projects. Each has been a reminder of how service not only strengthens individuals, but the whole of our professional community.

In recent years, YLD members have worked with organizations: Meeting Essential Needs with Dignity (MEND), the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, Habitat for Humanity, and Wills for Heroes. Many have become annual traditions. For example, in recent years we have worked with MEND's "MEND On The Move" program to load produce, caravan to distribution sites, and run a free farmers market for hundreds of local families.

Alongside the farmers market, families can also access additional resources such as children's book giveaways, nutrition education, and other valuable social services. The produce was appreciated, but the real value was in the conversations. We met people who shared their

stories, laughed with us, and left not just with food, but with a sense of connection and value.

As someone who did not attend college or law school in New Jersey, these events have been personally invaluable to me for building relationships with fellow lawyers beyond the confines of work. We bonded over shared effort and purpose, and those connections have lasted long after the end of the service event.

Getting Involved

As lawyers, we are cautioned against making guarantees in our line of work, but here is one I will make: once you start volunteering, you will find yourself looking for the next opportunity before you know it. The benefits for you, your career, and your community are too compelling to ignore.

The best volunteer experiences align with your interests, values, and schedule. Start by identifying a cause you care about—whether food insecurity, animal welfare, youth mentorship, environmen-

tal sustainability, or legal aid—and look for organizations in that space. If you have been on the fence, start small: sign up for a one-day event, lend a hand at a community fundraiser, or keep an eye out for YLD service events throughout the year! The goal is not perfection or total transformation—it is participation.

Here are just a handful New Jersey organizations actively seeking volunteers for legal or non-legal opportunities:

- Volunteer Lawyers for Justice—Newark
- Legal Services of New Jersey—Statewide
- Meeting Essential Needs with Dignity (MEND)—Orange
- United Methodist Aid to the Community (CUMAC)—Paterson
- Toni's Kitchen—Montclair
- Literacy Volunteers of America, Essex & Passaic Counties—Bloomfield
- Central Jersey Animal Rescue—Milltown
- CASA of Passaic and Union Counties—Elizabeth
- Boys & Girls Clubs of Mercer County—Trenton
- Caring Hospice Services of South Jersey—Mount Laurel

You can also explore opportunities by visiting volunteermatch.org. Another simple way to get started is to visit an organization's website and sign up for their listserv. This keeps you informed about the work they are doing in the community, upcoming volunteer opportunities, and creative ways you can contribute on your own. If you have an idea for a volunteer event or simply want to get involved but are not sure where to start, feel free to reach out. I would be happy to brainstorm possible events or opportunities with you.

Find a cause that speaks to you. Clear an afternoon. Step out of your comfort zone. From the courtroom to the community, the lessons you will learn outside the law office will be some of the most valuable of your career.

Let's get to work! ■