

# Navigating Pro Bono Connect: Narrowing Connecticut's Access to Justice Gap

By CECIL J. THOMAS



CBA Pro Bono Connect

**C** OVID-19's economic impact will be significant and enduring. As Connecticut's courts begin to re-open in the coming months, tens of thousands of Connecticut residents will be forced to fight for their homes, resolve child custody and family relationships disputes, seek protection from domestic violence, and address consumer finance claims without the means to secure the assistance of a lawyer. Connecticut lawyers must respond to this crisis to ensure access to justice, to protect the rule of law, and to preserve public confidence in our justice system. Join us in providing pro bono representation to our most vulnerable residents through Pro Bono Connect, a recently launched Connecticut Bar Association initiative.

## What is Pro Bono Connect?

Pro Bono Connect allows volunteer attorneys to connect with legal service providers to receive a pro bono case referral, and offers volunteers relevant, on-demand trainings to prepare for pro bono representation. Pro Bono Connect was developed by the Legal Aid Subcommittee of the CBA Covid-19 Taskforce.

## How do I sign up?

Visit [ctbar.org/ProBonoConnect](http://ctbar.org/ProBonoConnect) to start the process. Under **For Attorneys**, click on the **Learn More** button and then select the **Sign Up Now** button. This will bring you to an online form, where you will be able to provide your basic contact information and express your interest in the types of referral you would like to receive as well as your preferred geographical service area in Connecticut. Once you submit the form, your name

and selections will be shared with State-wide Legal Services, which will contact you with appropriate case referrals.

## What is the Pro Bono Pledge?

As you are completing the sign-up form, you will notice the option to take the Pro Bono Pledge. The Pro Bono Pledge is a personal commitment to take at least one pro bono referral per year in each of your selected areas of interest. If you take the pledge, you will be able to access on-demand webinar training videos and supporting materials, relevant to the case referral preferences you selected, at no cost to you.

## How do I access the trainings?

If you have taken the pledge, the trainings, based on the case referral preferences you have selected, will appear automatically in your CBA Education Portal Dashboard (accessible at [ctbar.org/EducationPortal](http://ctbar.org/EducationPortal)). Alternatively, you may pay to access the trainings within the "CBA Pro Bono Connect" portion of the CBA Education Portal Course Catalogue. All of the revenue generated from these trainings is designated to the Connecticut Bar Foundation to benefit Connecticut's legal services providers.

## What trainings are available?

Currently, ten on-demand webinar trainings, featuring video presentations and supporting written resources, are available in the CBA Pro Bono Connect course catalogue. Topics include eviction and foreclosure defense, emergency custody

hearings, domestic violence protective and restraining orders, introductions to immigration law, immigration detention and bond hearings, consumer bankruptcy, auto repossessions, and Veterans Administration benefits. We will work to expand and update these offerings in the coming year, so please check back in periodically. If there is an area that you can help us expand, please get in touch!

## How long will I have to prepare?

The pledge allows you up to one year to take your first case, and once you sign up, the associated trainings will remain accessible in your CBA Education Portal Dashboard for one year. If your professional or personal obligations do not allow you to take a case when you are first contacted, communicate this with your referring legal services provider. There is no shortage of need, and you will be contacted again at your preference to check on your availability.

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*Cecil J. Thomas is the 2020-2021 president-elect of the Connecticut Bar Association and chair of its Pro Bono Committee.*

*He is an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid, where he has represented thousands of low-income clients, predominantly in housing matters, since 2006, and has obtained significant appellate and class action victories on behalf of low-income Connecticut residents. Attorney Thomas also co-chairs the legal aid subcommittee of the Covid-19 taskforce, which led the development and launch of Pro Bono Connect in April and May of 2020.*

## President's Message

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privacy concerns, you can e-mail Traci directly at [drcipriano@optimum.net](mailto:drcipriano@optimum.net).

We are committed to championing our communities as we continue to strengthen, grow, and elevate the standing of Connecticut's legal profession. In facing our current challenges, we also will guide our clients to good and right results on legal issues facing our communities and staunchly support our colleagues who have the passion for public service and the protection of our human and civil rights.

As the first Asian Pacific American (or APA) to serve as CBA president, I am particularly sensitive to the surge in racism we are experiencing. The CBA endeavors to protect and provide relief to

all of our communities who are affected by the forces of racism, dehumanization, violence, and scapegoating during this already disturbing time. Additionally, increasing diversity in the legal profession results in better service to our clients, facilitates access to justice, and improves the legal profession as a whole. To keep you apprised of our ongoing diversity and inclusion efforts, please see our new Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion column on page 31, which is launching in this issue and will appear in future issues of *CT Lawyer*.

The feedback we receive is helpful as we shape this new legal landscape. We are grateful for the good and special people in our CBA membership for your dedication and commitment, not only to the association's causes but also to the vitality and health of the legal profession and our communities.

Although our physical CBA offices remain closed to the public, the CBA staff continues to keep the Connecticut Bar Association fully operational and have implemented new protocols for everyone's well-being and safety in preparation for when our offices can reopen and in-person meetings may resume. Please do not hesitate to reach out if there is anything we may do to assist you by e-mailing [info@ctbar.org](mailto:info@ctbar.org) or calling (844)469-2221.

Please stay safe, be well, and thank you for your patience. ■

## Pro Bono

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### What if I need additional support or a case consultation?

Contact your local legal aid office. You'll find a list of Connecticut civil legal aid providers on the CBA website at [ctbar.org/probonoorganizations](http://ctbar.org/probonoorganizations). Attorneys within these organizations have deep expertise and significant experience, and may be able to consult with you on individual case questions or direct you to further supporting materials.

### What about malpractice insurance?

The CBA does not provide malpractice insurance coverage. However, some of Connecticut's legal aid providers are able to offer malpractice insurance coverage with a case referral.

### Why should I get involved?

Many words have been devoted to our ethical obligations, as attorneys, to provide pro bono legal representation.<sup>1</sup> We could also discuss, at great length, the broader philosophical and policy considerations, our responsibilities as officers of the court, the proper administration of justice, the rule of law, or the obligations arising from our status as an independent and self-regulated profession. Each of these reasons have been addressed before, and will undoubtedly be addressed again in the future. For now, I will give you the simplest reason. Applying your expertise to the aid of those at risk of homelessness, those seeking relief from violence, those overwhelmed by the odds and facing financial crisis, those who have no other hope of a level playing field, is deeply fulfilling. This is our calling as a profession, and when we are at our best. I hope you will join the fight by taking the Pro Bono Pledge, and lending your legal talents to Connecticut's most vulnerable residents. Now, more than ever, we need your experience, your skills, and your compassion in the pursuit of justice for all. ■

## NOTES

1. See Connecticut Rules of Professional Conduct Rule 6.1.

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**BRIAN MEZICK**

New Haven County State Marshal  
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(203) 684-3100  
[statemarshal@mezick.com](mailto:statemarshal@mezick.com)

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