Letter to the Editor

We grew up thinking of America as the wealthiest country on earth, but the truth is that more than 11% of the residents in Illinois in 2019 lived below the federal poverty level ($21,720 for a family of three) – and the numbers are higher for children and people of color. An additional 23% of Illinois residents are asset limited, income constrained, and employed (ALICE) – they are working hard to make ends meet but cannot afford basic household necessities. With COVID-19’s impact on employment, it is expected that these numbers are even higher now.

We have created programs to provide those basic needs to our poorer neighbors, but too often, those of limited means lose out on programs and everyday justice because they do not have lawyers to help. In 2020, it is estimated that 846,000 Illinoisans lost employer-sponsored health insurance during the COVID-19 pandemic with only modest increases in Medicaid enrollment during the same time. Unemployment claims remain high – more than 1.7 million since March – where the Illinois unemployment rate of 10.9 percent in August 2020 is the highest in an August since 1983. Many families do not know about the programs available or rules developed to protect them because they have never been in this situation before. And national estimates say that 80% of the legal needs of the poor are unmet before COVID-19 hit.

The pro bono assistance of lawyers is often the only thing standing between the poor and hunger, homelessness, and abuse. In 2019, more than 31,000 Illinois lawyers reported that they had provided pro bono legal services. They gave almost 2,000,000 hours’ worth of free legal services. Illinois lawyers also donated over $16 million in monetary contributions to pro bono legal services organizations. Since the 2013 registration year, every Illinois lawyer paid $95 in their registration fee that goes to fund legal services. And in this COVID-19 year, pro bono attorneys are learning how to address eviction moratorium rules, remotely represent pro bono clients, attend virtual hearings, and work with local legal aid programs to make sure their communities know about resources available to them.

In order to educate everyone about the good these volunteers in Illinois’ legal community do, and to recruit more attorneys and paralegals to meet these needs, the week of October 25 through 31, 2020, has been designated National Pro Bono Week. During that week, we would like you to join us in recognizing the selfless people who have been providing free legal assistance to all those who need help. They are the strands in the safety net protecting our neighbors who are in the greatest need of help.

(Any other specifics the author or organization wants to publicize—local numbers of volunteers, events, etc.)

Signed by group leader