



Lawyers meet voluntary pro bono target for first time since 2013

The World Today By Casey Briggs

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A voluntary target for the amount of pro bono work done by Australian lawyers has been met for the first time since 2013.

The Australian Pro Bono Centre's goal is for all lawyers to do 35 hours of free work for the community each year.

A total of 101 firms are signed up to the target, including 18 of the 20 biggest firms in Australia.

The 11,185 lawyers working for those firms did an average of 36 hours of pro bono work in the past financial year, according to the organisation's annual performance report.

Nearly half of companies met the 35-hour target.

Pro bono services can include legal help for people suffering financial hardship and work for charities and non-profits, and much of it is done in partnership with community legal centres.

John Corker from the Australian Pro Bono Centre said the increase in unpaid work being done by the legal profession was a positive step.

"There are more firms that are taking the pro bono ethos seriously, and investing some resources into making sure that it is coordinated," Mr Corker said.

He warned there are some services that private firms will never provide, and Federal Government funding cuts to community legal centres have increased the pressure.

"Pro bono always has taken the approach, because it's a provision of a service by the private sector, that it shouldn't go into those areas where government provides legal aid services," he said.

More government legal aid funding needed

Law Council of Australia president Stuart Clark said he was very proud of the contribution lawyers make.

"What other profession provides a week a year of free services?" he said.

"It's a strange thing that the legal profession for some reason is expected to do a week a year, which we do willingly in any event, to answer the unmet need for legal aid.

"You wouldn't ask doctors to spend a week a year working unpaid to simply make up the shortfall in Medicare."

He said legal aid funding has been declining for a decade and the current government contribution is unacceptable.

It is a sentiment echoed by community legal services.

Scott McDougall from Brisbane's Caxton Legal Centre said pro bono was not the answer to the "access to justice crisis".

"As a whole, lawyers get a pretty bad rap, when you consider the level of generosity that they quite often display," he said.

"Obviously not all lawyers fall into that category but I'm consistently astounded by the volunteer lawyers we have here at Caxton who slave away in their private practice all day and then turn up at night at our centre and continue to provide services to the public."

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Key points:

- The Australian Pro Bono Centre's asks lawyers to do 35 hours of free community work a year
- Pro bono services can help people struggling with financial hardship and non-profits
- The Law Council of Australia says legal aid funding has been declining for a decade

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Mr McDougall called on the Government to provide an extra \$200 million for the community legal sector each year, as recommended by the Productivity Commission two years ago.

Topics: judges-and-legal-profession, charities-and-community-organisations, australia

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