



2022-2025 VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT PLAN¹

“We educated, privileged lawyers have a professional and moral duty to represent the unrepresented in our society, to ensure that justice exists for all, both legal and economic justice.”

– Associate U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor

Introducing Prairie State Legal Services: Working to Close the Justice Gap in our Communities

Prairie State Legal Services, Inc. is a non-profit law firm that provides free civil legal aid to low-income persons and seniors who have important legal problems affecting their basic human needs. Prairie State serves clients in 36 counties in northern and central Illinois, outside of Cook County, from 11 local offices and several special projects. We represent survivors of domestic violence in orders of protection, divorce and other family cases; people with disabilities who are wrongfully denied benefits; tenants who are being unlawfully evicted from their homes; families who are facing utility shut-offs or mortgage foreclosures; seniors who are facing improper discharge from nursing homes or are victims of elder abuse; veterans who need help securing SNAP (Food Stamp) benefits to which they are entitled; and many others with urgent legal problems. Our assistance can make the difference between continuing physical abuse and safety for a family; between homelessness and a decent place to live; between the danger of transfer trauma for a disabled elderly adult and stability at home or in a nursing facility; between access to basic medical care and progression of disease or exacerbation of symptoms; and between hunger and having enough to eat. More information about Prairie State can be found at www.pslegal.org.

“I just wanted to thank you for all of your help. As a single, working parent the amount of paperwork and the steps in the divorce process were daunting. Your knowledge of the process and the people associated with the process was invaluable, not to mention an extreme comfort! I consider you and the Prairie State Legal Services a true God send! My biggest concern in this case was the safety of my son. You were able to guide me into a place where there are clear legal boundaries in place, which gives me recourse when they are broken and not observed. Thank you so much!”

- Letter from a Joliet client to a *pro bono* volunteer

¹ As a recipient of federal funds from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), Prairie State must follow federal regulations promulgated by LSC in the operation of its program and services. These regulations require grantees to prepare a Private Attorney Involvement (PAI) Plan (45 CFR Part 1614), to operate a PAI program, and to report to LSC annually regarding its PAI services. This document is Prairie State’s PAI Plan for the years 2022-2025.

Prairie State is the only provider of free civil legal aid in most of the 36 counties we serve. The need for legal assistance far surpasses the capacity of Prairie State's paid staff of over 200 attorneys, paralegals, intake specialists, *pro bono* coordinators, and support staff – many of whom are part-time employees – to provide advice and representation to eligible clients:

- Prior to COVID-19, Prairie State's 36 county service area was home to over 447,000 persons with incomes below 100% of the federal poverty level and hundreds of thousands more with incomes below 200% of the poverty level. In 2019, Illinois had a poverty rate of 11.4%. This rate was above the national poverty rate of 10.5%. Additionally, between 2000 and 2018, the percentage of the Chicago region's poor who were living in the suburbs rose from 34% to 49%, meaning low income residents moved from Chicago into Prairie State's service area. In short, the number of residents potentially eligible for Prairie State's help continues to grow. (Census data; September 2019 Illinois and Chicago Region: Poverty, Income, and Health Insurance Fact Sheet, Heartland Alliance)
- In 2022, the Legal Services Corporation, a not for profit corporation which distributes the Congressional allocation for legal aid programs, issued the latest version of its [Justice Gap Report](#). That report concluded that "74% of low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem in the year – with many households dealing with multiple problems." Specifically, "about three in five (62%) households experienced two or more problems, about two in five (39%) experienced five or more, and a shocking one in five (20%) of all low-income households experienced 10 or more problems in the past year." The types of legal problems most often faced by low-income households include: consumer issues, health care, income maintenance, housing, family and safety, and education.
- The COVID-19 Pandemic exacerbated these problems. The Justice Gap Report found that, "One-third (33%) of all low-income Americans personally experienced at least one civil legal problem related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the past year." Additionally, "the types of problems people are most likely to blame on the pandemic also track with our common understanding of how the pandemic has affected people. For example, respondents attribute nearly one-third (32%) of all their income maintenance problems to the pandemic, 31% of their education problems, and 27% of their housing problems."
- The Justice Gap Report found low-income Americans only seek legal help from a civil legal aid program like Prairie State for less than 19% of their problems. Of the problems for which people seek help, "71% of these problems will either not receive any legal help or not receive enough legal help to be fully resolved." For example they might receive legal advice rather than representation. In large part, this is because the legal aid program has insufficient staff or other resources to handle the matter.
- In 2021, Prairie State opened over 15,000 cases for services ranging from individualized legal advice over the phone to representation in court. However, due to lack of staff or volunteers to handle the cases, Prairie State closed over 3,000 of those cases with advice or other assistance short of full representation even though the matter was of significant importance to the client's basic needs.

The justice gap – the wide gulf between the critical legal needs of low-income members of our community and the ability of Prairie State to meet those needs – is the reason that *pro bono* work by hundreds of dedicated volunteers is so critical, and why it is essential for us to continue to build cost effective *pro bono* projects which address our clients' most critical needs. We need your help in these efforts.

Prairie State's Volunteer Programs

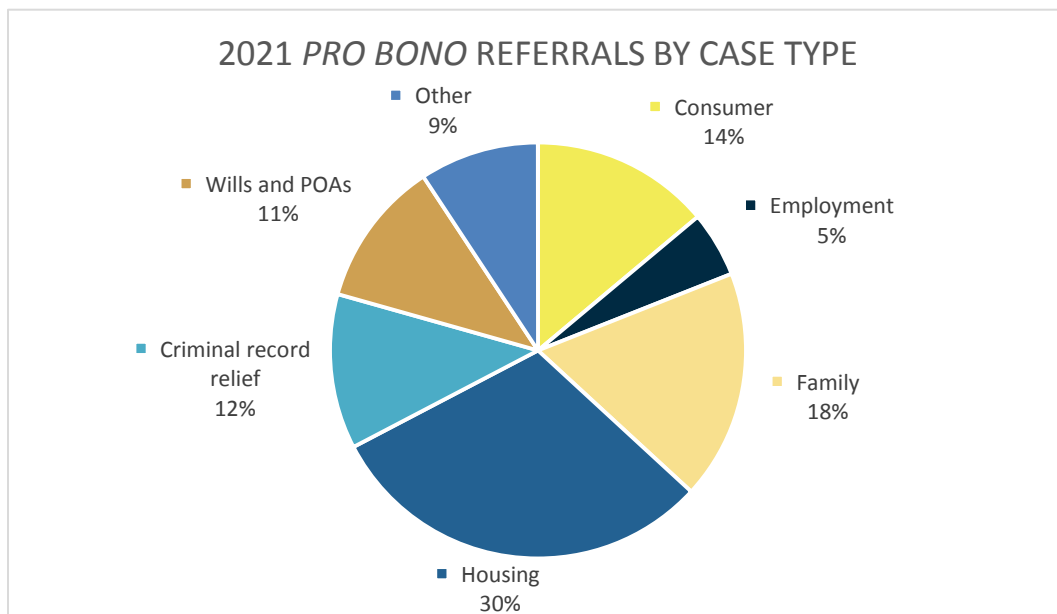
The work of volunteer attorneys, paralegals, law students, undergraduates, intake specialists, support staff, and others across the Prairie State service area provides a critical supplement to the work of Prairie State's paid staff. In addition to enabling Prairie State to help more of northern and central Illinois' most vulnerable residents and making immeasurable improvements in the lives of those clients and their families, volunteers make a larger contribution to the public good. A number of recent studies have uncovered alarmingly low rates of confidence in our justice system. Volunteers support the justice system and the public's faith in that system by increasing the ability of the public to access the courts and helping ensure the fair administration of justice.

Prairie State's *pro bono* program currently consists of a central *Pro Bono* unit and 10 local *pro bono* programs from our local offices. The central unit focuses on creating program-wide *pro bono* projects which allow volunteers to serve clients throughout our service area. Meanwhile, the local office programs operate with strong support from the local bar and courts, and focus primarily on referring individual cases to local attorneys for extended representation, for example in court, in negotiations, or before administrative agencies. Prairie State also operates several advice clinics and courthouse help desks and has a program-wide *Pro Bono* Telephone Counseling project, providing advice to clients on a range of issues. Additionally, dozens of volunteers work in our offices each year in a variety of capacities. All work performed through Prairie State's *pro bono* projects is covered by Prairie State's malpractice insurance.

Since the fall of 2019, PSLS has been working with the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) on a *Pro Bono* Innovation Fund (PBIF) Transformation grant. This grant has allowed us to take an in depth look at our *pro bono* program and implement changes to help make our program more effective and efficient so that we can continue to expand the opportunities offered to both clients and volunteers. Although this grant will end in the fall of 2022, our commitment to continuously evaluating and improving our *pro bono* program will continue.

2021 Pro Bono Highlights

- In 2021, over 330 volunteer attorneys represented Prairie State clients in advice and extended representation cases. Attorneys accepted 1726 new case referrals from our *pro bono* projects, local offices, and telephone counseling service. Approximately 30% of these cases involved housing, 18% involved a family law matter, and another 12% involved criminal records relief.



- Cases referred to volunteers reflect the changing client needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, only 10 consumer cases were referred to volunteers throughout all of 2019. In 2020, that number was 160, in 2021 it was 195. Employment cases were only referred to volunteers twice in 2019, but 94 times in 2020 and 88 times in 2021. Finally, housing cases accounted for only 14 case referrals in 2019, but 289 referrals in 2020 and 526 referrals in 2021.
- In 2021, volunteers reported 7750 hours of service to clients referred by our *pro bono* programs. This outstanding contribution of volunteer time demonstrates the strong commitment of our volunteers. In addition to serving clients, in some cases these hours also help us access grant funding because of the value of this time. We believe that some volunteers underreport their volunteer time, perhaps not realizing that this information is critical to us for our assessment of the effectiveness of our volunteer programs and that the data is considered by some funders of Prairie State.

“I enjoy providing legal assistance for people who couldn’t otherwise afford it and achieving positive outcomes for them.”
– Joliet volunteer

- Volunteers reported securing court awards for family law clients referred to them by our local projects totaling over \$508,000 in annual child support or maintenance and \$120,000 in one-time property allocations. These awards will provide essential help to these clients to care for their families.
- Nearly 60 attorney volunteers with our Telephone Counseling/Intake Project completed 970 cases by providing individualized advice or other brief services to callers. They also spoke with many additional clients with the most critical cases, offered them initial advice, and referred their cases on to our local offices for more in-depth services.
- Throughout the summer of 2021, 18 law students interned with Prairie State. These students interviewed clients, drafted court pleadings, conducted legal research, reviewed and summarized medical records in Social Security cases, and performed other activities in support of our work. Many law student interns become *pro bono* volunteers after they are admitted to practice; at least one member of Prairie State’s current Board of Directors began his relationship with us as a summer law student.
- In 2021, 16 retired, inactive, or out-of-state attorneys were licensed to perform *pro bono* services through Prairie State under [Illinois Supreme Court Rule 756\(k\)](#).

Prairie State is a sponsoring entity under Illinois Supreme Court Rule 756(k); retired and inactive status attorneys can register with the Illinois ARDC to practice under our auspices, without returning to active status.

Prairie State also is an MCLE provider. We offer a variety of MCLE events and recorded training to support the work of our volunteers. All of our MCLE events are free of charge.

- Prairie State presented 18 virtual continuing legal education courses to volunteers and prospective volunteers.
- Prairie State worked closely with bar associations throughout our 36 county service area to place cases with local attorneys, recognize volunteers, encourage *pro bono* involvement, and develop new volunteer opportunities.

- Prairie State continued to work with the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) and with members of the local bar and judiciary to promote *pro bono* participation through the Judicial Circuit *Pro Bono* Committees in the Tenth, Eleventh, Fourteenth and Eighteenth Judicial Circuits in 2021.
- Prairie State enjoyed ongoing relationships with the corporate legal departments of Caterpillar Inc., Deere & Company, McDonald's and State Farm.

We thank our volunteers and our *pro bono* partners for making these accomplishments possible in 2022!

2022-2025 Volunteer Involvement Goals and Local Input

With over 14,000 attorneys registered with the ARDC in Prairie State's service area and hundreds of thousands of low-income residents in need of legal aid, we continue to explore ways to increase participation in our *pro bono* program and to efficiently integrate volunteers into our service delivery model.

We shared our 2021-2022 PAI Plan with many members of the bar and the judiciary in our service area. We also used an online survey, seeking feedback from members of the private bar on our 2021-2022 PAI plan and *pro bono* program. The majority of survey respondents felt that it was important for Prairie State to involve volunteers in many different areas of law, ranging from representing clients in court in family law and eviction matters, to representing clients in expungement and sealing matters, to providing representation in the same kinds of basic needs cases that Prairie State staff handle.

We also asked survey respondents to rate the importance of each of the goals from our 2021-2022 PAI Plan. Overall, respondents agreed that all of the goals were important, with very few respondents answering that particular goals were not important, and only 3 respondents answering that specific goals should not be included in our plan. Respondents felt the most important goal was to develop and offer "bite-sized" *pro bono* opportunities which meet volunteer interests and client needs, but which are also cost effective. This seems to contradict the majority of respondents who stated that it was important for Prairie State to involve volunteers in providing representation in court to clients with family law cases and facing eviction. However, this likely just reflects the need for Prairie State to offer a range of volunteer options.

After developing "bite-sized" opportunities, respondents rated the goal of recruiting more retired and inactive attorneys to volunteer in our offices as the next most important priority. This was followed by a tie between "developing new *pro bono* projects which will address areas of client need while offering volunteers options in terms of level of service and time commitment required" and "recruiting bilingual volunteer attorneys and training English speaking volunteer attorneys to use Prairie State's interpreting and translation resources."

These responses have helped shape our goals and priorities for the coming years. The following are the goals for our volunteer program for 2022-2025.

"Thank you for helping me when I felt no one would."
- Bloomington Office *pro bono* client

1. Increase coordination among Prairie State offices to expand opportunities that cross geographical boundaries.

In 2021, 71% of all registered attorneys in Illinois practiced within Cook County and 86.8% of all registered attorneys in Illinois practiced within metropolitan Chicago (Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will counties). That leaves only 13.2% or 8,810 lawyers practicing in the remaining 96 counties in the state. Some of the counties we serve have as few as 4 or 5 attorneys in private practice for the entire county. On the flip side, many of the counties with few attorneys are also the counties with the highest poverty rates.

With the increase in remote court appearances and virtual meetings due to COVID-19, it is no longer always necessary for attorneys to travel to the county where a client lives to meet with the client or even attend court. This provides us the opportunity to utilize the expertise of attorneys in one geographical area to assist clients in other parts of our service area. We have already begun developing *pro bono* projects which cross geographical boundaries (discussed below). In the coming years, we also plan to continue exploring ways to increase the communication and coordination among our different offices. This will ensure we are employing best practices and continuing to develop effective and efficient *pro bono* service delivery models throughout our service area, allowing us to best make use of the availability, skills and expertise of attorneys in every part of our service area, while also expanding the number of clients we can serve.

2. Develop several new *pro bono* projects which will address areas of client need while offering volunteers options in terms of level of service and time commitment required.

Throughout 2021 and the beginning of 2022, we have focused on creating new *pro bono* projects to expand the types of volunteer opportunities we offer. For example, we created a project where volunteers assist clients with advice and negotiations in eviction cases. This project is entirely remote, so volunteers can represent clients throughout our service area. Similarly, in the summer of 2022, we plan to launch a program-wide family law virtual advice clinic which will pair volunteers with clients needing help with a family law case. These volunteers will be able to walk a client through the steps to proceed *pro se*, but can also help to review paperwork or ghost-write petitions for the client. Over the next several years, we plan to continue creating and implementing new projects, which will each focus on a different area of client need.

This goal incorporates many of the issues that survey respondents felt were important. Among the priorities that the survey asked respondents about, the one rated highest was to “develop and offer ‘bite-sized’ opportunities which meet volunteer interests and client needs, but which are also cost effective.” Relatedly, respondents thought it was important to expand the use of limited scope *pro bono* representation to assist more clients in court matters. On the other hand, a majority of respondents also felt it was important to involve *pro bono* volunteers in representing clients in court for family law matters, particularly domestic violence survivors, and to represent clients in court in eviction cases. The takeaway from these responses is that it is important to offer a variety of opportunities for *pro bono* attorneys.

Beyond the time commitment required of volunteers, the survey respondents also provided feedback on some of the areas of law where they felt it was important for Prairie State to involve *pro bono* attorneys. These areas include family law, criminal record expungement and sealing, wills/powers of attorney, and housing. These have been areas of significant client need for many years and that need has only grown in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Many people continue to face eviction and housing insecurity due to hardships experienced during the pandemic, but with increased demand for housing units, it is often difficult for clients to find affordable housing if they are evicted. Family law, bankruptcy, and wills/powers of attorney will continue to be areas of high client need as we recover from the pandemic and navigate any still unknown long-term health impacts, as well as face new challenges of inflation and an uncertain economy. Expungement and sealing cases will be important to help clients find new employment. These cases are particularly appropriate for volunteer

involvement as they do not require a volunteer to “drop everything,” but still allow the volunteer to make a very significant difference for a client.

Although we have long prioritized finding attorneys willing to help in these areas, there are many more clients in need of *pro bono* assistance. By creating *pro bono* projects which span more than one office, we hope to make our *pro bono* program more efficient and cost-effective, allowing us to recruit more volunteers and help even more clients. As we develop new projects, we will look at ways to offer volunteers the opportunity to provide different levels of service. However, we recognize that the greatest need of our clients is for experienced attorneys who will provide direct and extended representation in court and in negotiations, so we do plan to continue referring extended representation cases where possible (see next goal for more details).

We also understand the demands that our volunteers face, both professional and personal, and acknowledge that not every attorney is able to dedicate the time required to take on a *pro bono* case for full representation. Therefore, as we are developing new *pro bono* projects, we will continue to explore ways to expand the use of limited scope *pro bono* representation to reach and assist more clients. Illinois Supreme Court Rule 137(e) allows an attorney to assist a self-represented litigant in drafting or reviewing a pleading, motion, or other document without making a general or limited scope appearance. We see many potential clients who possess the skills to be able to represent themselves successfully in court with this drafting assistance and detailed advice for proceeding in court. We will continue our efforts to match those potential clients with volunteers. Additionally, we will look to be more creative in finding cases in which an attorney willing to enter a limited scope appearance to handle a single aspect of a case in court can make a difference for a client.

Finally, where practical, we will continue to try to identify ways to meet the growing demand from busy attorneys for bite-sized *pro bono* opportunities. However, although the need for civil legal aid services is almost limitless, it is challenging to create bite-sized *pro bono* opportunities that are meaningful to both volunteers and clients, and also cost effective for Prairie State. Many people who are unfamiliar with the operation of *pro bono* programs are surprised to learn that there is significant time involved in administering them properly. Attorneys volunteering their time expect that Prairie State will screen the cases for client financial eligibility and for at least apparent merit. The cases we refer through our *pro bono* program remain Prairie State cases. This allows us to offer malpractice insurance to our volunteers and to report the cases to our funders. It also means, however, that we must comply with certain reporting and oversight requirements of our funders and our malpractice carrier. We must follow up to be sure that the cases are completed and that we have case closing data such as the information reflected in this Volunteer Involvement Plan. All of this takes time. We will continue to assess our current bite-sized *pro bono* offerings to maximize their cost effectiveness and efficiency. We also will continue to refine our data collection and client data base to maximize efficient data entry and effective extraction of meaningful reports.

“You took my case and helped me resolve all of the issues that needed attention. I was treated with respect from beginning to end.”

- Peoria Office *pro bono* client

3. Continue to prioritize referral of individual clients to volunteer attorneys for extended representation.

Although thorough advice and brief services enable many of our clients to represent themselves effectively, many more of our clients lack the ability to navigate the legal system successfully without an attorney. One of the most cost effective uses of the limited resources Prairie State is able to devote to *pro bono* involvement is for experienced attorneys to provide direct and extended representation to clients in court and in negotiations. Therefore, as we are modernizing our *pro bono* program and developing new projects, we will also continue to prioritize referring clients to volunteer attorneys for extended representation where possible.

Prairie State has a rich history of involving volunteers in extended representation cases, and this type of involvement remains the “gold standard” for our clients. This was acknowledged in the survey responses. Even as respondents stated that one of the most important goals was for Prairie State to develop more “bite-sized” opportunities, a majority of the respondents (52.8%) also felt it was important to involve volunteers in representing clients in court in family law cases, particularly for abuse survivors, and in representing clients in court who are faced with eviction.

4. Recruit more retired and inactive attorneys to volunteer in our offices.

Retired attorneys who volunteer in our offices and function as unpaid staff are one of our most valuable *pro bono* assets. While most of these attorneys do not have prior poverty law experience, their years of practice allow them to learn new areas of law quickly and they bring a fresh perspective to the issues legal aid attorneys see day in and day out. Because they no longer have an outside practice, many of these retired attorneys are able to devote time to contested or complex matters, and can serve a large volume of clients. For example, we currently have retired attorneys working in our Rockford and Bloomington offices, as well as in our Telephone Counseling service. In 2021, we referred 55 cases to the Bloomington volunteer, 127 to the Rockford volunteer, and 144 to the telephone counseling volunteer. For our non-retired volunteers, we referred each volunteer an average of 4.5 cases per year. In addition to case numbers, our retired volunteers dedicated a significant amount of time throughout 2021. The Rockford volunteer contributed 424 hours throughout the year, the Bloomington volunteer contributed 163 hours, and the telephone counseling volunteer contributed 388 hours. Compare that with our non-retired volunteers, who on average are only able to donate less than 20 hours per year.

Prairie State provides support, training, and supervision to these in-house volunteer attorneys, but we find that many attorneys are not aware that [Illinois Supreme Court Rule 756\(k\)](#) allows them to perform *pro bono* services through a sponsoring entity like Prairie State, even after they have changed their attorney registration status to inactive or retired. We will continue to publicize this option and to target retiring attorneys in our recruitment efforts. Retired attorneys are not the only potential source of in-house volunteer lawyers. Many attorneys do not have paid positions because of family situations or obligations, but wish to remain active and contribute their special knowledge to their communities. These potential volunteers bring a wealth of value to our clients and our work. We will continue to seek these volunteers, and to provide them with the support they need to represent our clients and find a meaningful volunteer opportunity with us.

5. Use technology to train and support volunteers.

We believe that in-person continuing legal education is an effective way to train new volunteers and to thank existing volunteers for their service. However, technology affords new opportunities to efficiently and timely train and support volunteers, especially now that many attorneys (including those at Prairie State) have been working from home and have become more comfortable utilizing new technology to hold meetings and interact with clients.

Over the past several years we have created a substantial library of recorded training to allow for continuous onboarding of *pro bono* volunteers. We plan to continue offering virtual and in person MCLE events and attorney trainings to allow us to reach attorneys throughout our service area. Additionally, we are in the process of updating our website to allow for *pro bono* attorneys to login to a centralized location and access all of the training videos and resources they need to effectively represent our clients. Several of the survey respondents also indicated that it would be useful to have a way to browse available cases, either through a website or recurring email, so that volunteers can identify cases they want to work on when it best fits their schedule, rather than having to wait to be sent a referral. This is something we have long considered developing and we hope to implement in the coming years.

6. Recruit bilingual volunteer attorneys to represent limited English-proficient clients, and train English-speaking volunteer attorneys to use Prairie State’s interpreting and translation resources.

Many residents of our 36 counties have limited ability in English and require legal help for basic needs problems, but it has been a challenge to find volunteers to serve these clients. Almost 6.5 percent of the clients served by Prairie State staff in 2021 were limited English-proficient, but only 2.9 percent of *pro bono* cases involved limited English-proficient clients. This is an improvement from 2020 when only 1.2 percent of *pro bono* cases involved limited English-proficient clients, but still not representative of Prairie State’s clients as a whole. Self-representation is a particular challenge for individuals who are not proficient in English and thus finding volunteers who are willing to work with these clients is a priority. Prairie State has funds available to cover the costs of interpretation and translation services.

We need your input!

Prairie State needs input to make our *pro bono* program as effective as possible. Our most successful *pro bono* efforts have grown out of conversations with our partners – the courts, bar associations, law firms, social service agencies, state and federal government, and individuals in our communities. Please share your ideas with us at volunteer@pslegal.org or by contacting Prairie State’s Executive Director or Director of *Pro Bono* Services.

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You may also contact the staff of our central *Pro Bono* Unit or local offices:

***Pro Bono* Unit**

- *Pro Bono* Manager: Sally Pissetzky Steele (sstele@pslegal.org)
- *Pro Bono* Project Leads:
 - Bloomington office: Laurie Bell (lbelle@pslegal.org)
 - Rockford office: Wendy Crouch (wecrouch@pslegal.org)
 - West Suburban office: Mary Petruchius (mpetruchius@pslegal.org)

Bloomington – (309) 827-5021

(serving Livingston, McLean, and Woodford Counties)

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Kankakee – (815) 935-2750

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Peoria and Galesburg – (309) 674-9831

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Rockford – (815) 965-2902

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West Suburban – (630) 690-2130

(serving DeKalb, DuPage, Kane, and Kendall Counties)

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- Managing Attorney: Paul Zukowski (pzukowski@pslegal.org)
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Telephone Counseling *Pro Bono* Project – (630) 690-2130

- Project Coordinator: Cindy Matre (cmatre@pslegal.org)
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