

Free legal help on the rise

Lawyers clock in more hours while some law firms open dedicated pro bono departments

Jeremy Lim

LAWYERS here are giving up more of their time to provide free legal help to the needy.

The Law Society said that each lawyer reported an average of 14 hours of voluntary work last year. This is four hours more than the previous year's figure, the society told The Sunday Times.

This is a small victory for the profession, which has in recent years turned the spotlight on pro bono work, or service for the public good – though it is still far from its pledged target of 25 hours a year.

The recent push for pro bono work has come from the top guns in the legal system – the Chief Justice, Attorney-General and the Law Society president – and some law firms have responded by institutionalising their pro bono efforts.

This year, at least two firms – Drew & Napier, and WongPartnership – have opened dedicated pro bono departments. Harry Elias, another top firm, declared that its lawyers would each contribute at least 25 hours each year.

Last year, volunteer lawyers from the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (Clas) and the Association of Criminal Lawyers (ACLS) defended more than 350 people who were accused of crimes but could not af-

ford lawyers. Both Clas and ACLS are non-government groups that provide free legal advice to the needy.

Lawyers said it is sometimes difficult to take on pro bono work because of the long hours it can require. Simple cases can take 12 hours, and complex ones might take 70 hours, said the Law Society's director of pro bono services Lim Tanguy.

Case in point: Ismil Kadar, 44, who was charged with drug offences last week, escaped death row last year after being cleared of a murder he did not commit.

His lawyer, Mr R. Thrumurgan, fought his case pro bono for six years to prove his innocence.

Criminal lawyer Josephus Tan, 33, who clocked more than 700 pro bono hours last year, said: "What appears to be very straightforward can take a sudden twist and become very protracted."

Mr Tan, who earns about \$7,000 a month, said he tries to spend a third of his working hours serving the less fortunate.

Commercial lawyer Cyril Chua, 41, who does more than 200 hours of volunteer work a year, said it is important for firms to encourage pro bono work. He said lawyers sometimes feel pressured not to take up pro bono cases, which do not bring in revenue for the firm.

Said Mr Chua: "If they take on a big pro bono project, their partners may not be happy. This is mostly in big firms, where they have a more structured way of evaluating the profitability of a lawyer."

Mr Chua runs Project Law Help,



ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Criminal lawyer Josephus Tan tries to spend a third of his working hours serving the less fortunate.



PHOTO: LIM WEIXIANG FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Ms Nadia Yeo takes on pro bono cases because she wants to represent the underdog.



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Family lawyer June Lim, 25, became a lawyer to help the underprivileged.

ABOUT PRO BONO

FREE legal aid has a 2,000-year history, going by its Latin term pro bono publico, meaning "for the public good".

It can be traced to Roman times and has been present in Britain since 1275, said Singapore Management University law professor Rathna Nathan.

"It was an ethical obligation or social

responsibility," she said. "In ancient times, people became lawyers and doctors to serve society, not to make money."

In Singapore today, pro bono work includes free or discounted legal help for the needy, or for charitable organisations.

But pro bono work differs from ordinary volunteering because professional skills are needed.

Only certified lawyers can serve under the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme, for example.

Within the legal profession, there are different specialisations.

Some corporate lawyers may feel uncomfortable doing criminal work, and prefer to volunteer with charities, such as the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped.

Lawyers who normally handle cases for properties and divorces may prefer to volunteer in those areas.

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an initiative of the Law Society that match-makes law firms with charities that need legal advice. For example, The Spastic Children's Association of Singapore is supported by law firm Lau & Gur.

The rise in pro bono hours appears to be led by a new generation of lawyers who value personal fulfilment beyond pay and prestige, some lawyers said.

Clas chairman Gopinath Pillai said that a rising number of new volunteers are fresh faces passionate about helping the needy.

Lawyer Nadia Yeo, 25, takes on such cases because she wants to represent the underdog, she said.

"Clas helps to fill the gap, to ensure that even though they are not well off, they are no less well-represented in court," Ms Yeo said.

Last year, the lawyer from Rodyk & Davidson defended a girl in her late teens arrested for shoplifting with some friends. It was her second offence, and the court could have given her a fine or a few months' jail. Because of Ms Yeo's work, the teenager was put on probation, instead of being convicted.

Ms Yeo said she was heartened to learn later that her former client was scoring As at school and doing well.

"As defence counsel, we are in a position where we can advise these accused persons to change for the better," she said.

Juvenile and family lawyer June Lim, 25, said her main aim in being a lawyer is to use her skills to help the underprivileged.

The lawyer at TanJinHwee LLC works with aid organisations like the Humanitarian Organisation for Migrant Economics to defend those who need urgent help.

One case the lawyer took on in 2010 involved a Vietnamese woman in her 20s who was brought in by a bridal agency.

The woman married a Singaporean, but four years later, he was re-trenched. He kicked her out of the house and threatened to kill her if she came back.

On the day of the trial, the man finally agreed to compensate her with \$7,000.

Without a lawyer, the woman could have been forced to return to Vietnam empty-handed as she was on a two-week social visit pass, said Ms Lim. She added: "There is this gap in our legal aid services, and it's up to the pure goodwill of lawyers to fill it."

✉ jlilmwz@sph.com.sg