

Assessing a Law Firm's Commitment to Pro Bono

If you want to work at a law firm with a strong pro bono program, do your research to assess a firm's true level of support for pro bono work. No one piece of information is necessarily dispositive of a firm's pro bono commitment or culture. This guide will help you evaluate which firm is right for you.

Timing is important. You can raise questions about opportunities to do pro bono work during a callback interview. Please be mindful, however, that a firm is ultimately hiring you to do billable work, and it is best to wait until after you receive an offer to delve deeper. Once you receive an offer, ask to speak with an attorney who does pro bono work or the pro bono coordinator. You can find out how they incorporate pro bono into their caseload and learn more about the firm's commitment to pro bono.

As you evaluate a firm's commitment to pro bono, here are some things to consider.

Does the firm have a full-time person (or people) coordinating the pro bono program?
Most firms that are serious about pro bono have dedicated pro bono personnel, which often include partners or associates.

Does the pro bono attorney or manager work full- or part-time on pro bono matters in addition to managing the pro bono caseload and intake of matters?

Does the firm highlight pro bono on its website?

Does the firm encourage or require attorneys to perform a minimum number of pro bono hours? If so, how many?

- What percentage of lawyers perform pro bono each year?
- What is the average number of pro bono hours per lawyer?
- Do partners actively participate, or is it primarily junior associates?

What is the firm's pro bono ranking in American Lawyer magazine (see below)?

Look at the rankings as part of the overall picture of the firm's commitment; the numbers are only part of the picture and sometimes do not accurately reflect the firm's pro bono culture.

What kinds of pro bono matters does the firm usually work on?

- According to the firm's website, what kinds of work has the firm been involved in recently? Are you interested in working on those kinds of matters?
- How easy is it to be assigned to matters that interest you?
- Are there any issues/areas that the firm does not take?

How does the firm get its pro bono work?

- Does the firm work on pro bono cases with certain public interest organizations regularly?
- How is a pro bono matter screened and selected?
- If you have a particular passion, is there an opportunity to bring in your own pro bono matters?

How does pro bono factor into compensation, performance reviews, and partnership decisions?

- How is pro bono work counted towards the associate billable hour requirement?

What resources or trainings are available to attorneys who perform pro bono work?

Is the firm a signatory to the Pro Bono Institute (PBI) Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge?

The PBI Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge lists firms that have agreed to commit either 3% or 5% of their firm's total billable hours to pro bono work.

If your short- or long-term goals are to do public interest, government, or human rights work full-time, please connect with an adviser from the Office of Public Interest/Public Service Law and Careers to talk about other important ways to prepare for those transitions.

More Resources

Vault's Best Law Firms for Pro Bono

American Lawyer Pro Bono Scorecard 2025

Available through the Law Library. You will be prompted for your UNI and password.