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PRESS RELEASE

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Attorney General Frosh, Maryland Judiciary, Maryland State Bar, and Maryland Access to Justice Commission Issue

Pro Bono Call to Action

Maryland Attorneys Urged to Assist Marylanders in Need of Legal Assistance

BALTIMORE, MD– Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh today joined Chief Judge Mary Ellen Barbera of the Maryland Court of Appeals, Maryland State Bar Association (MSBA) President M. Natalie McSherry, and the Maryland Access to Justice Commission (A2JC) to issue an urgent pro bono call to action to Maryland’s legal community.

Before the pandemic, nearly 80% of Marylanders with civil legal problems were unable to obtain legal assistance and were forced to navigate the complex civil justice system on their own. As Maryland emerges from the pandemic, many Marylanders continue to face extraordinary challenges that only the civil justice system can resolve – like landlord/tenant or debtor/creditor issues, public benefits, and family law.

Attorney General Frosh partnered with the Maryland Judiciary, MSBA, and the Maryland Access to Justice Commission to urge every attorney to take at least one pro bono case or provide a designated number of pro bono service hours in the coming year to assist Marylanders in need of legal aid.

“The privilege of our professional, legal expertise comes with responsibility – a responsibility to give back to the community and a responsibility to make justice and the legal system accessible to all,” said Attorney General Frosh. “The COVID-19 pandemic has caused hardships unlike any we have seen in our lifetimes. The need for legal assistance is urgent. I am proud to partner with Chief Judge Barbera, leaders in Maryland’s legal community, and Maryland’s pro bono organizations to urge attorneys across the state to assist Marylanders in need.”

“I am proud to be part of this call for action for pro bono service – action that is sorely needed during these unprecedented times,” said Chief Judge Barbera. “I hope Maryland attorneys will answer the call.”

“The Maryland State Bar Association takes immense pride in the pro bono representation provided by its members in the past, and has great confidence in their ability and willingness to take those efforts to an even higher level, to help ensure that the residents of Maryland can have access to legal advice when needed, in any type of civil proceeding,” said MSBA President M. Natalie McSherry. “It is our ultimate responsibility as lawyers, and I know we will rise to meet that responsibility.”

“COVID-19 created an overwhelming civil justice crisis, which requires us to employ every tool in our access to justice toolbox to abate,” said Maryland Access to Justice Commission Executive Director Reena K. Shah. “Pro bono service is one of those tried and proven tools that gets results. Right now, many people are losing their David and Goliath battles against a hospital or with the agency that administers Medicaid because they are trying to navigate complex federal, state, and local laws and regulations on their own, without legal help. An attorney by your side is proven to be the most critical factor in the success of a case. If every attorney commits to doing pro bono service this year, that would help over 40,000 Marylanders. That's huge and will have an impact, especially when coupled with A2JC's other efforts to increase funding for civil legal aid and make access to counsel a reality.”

In June 2020, Attorney General Frosh partnered with the MSBA-backed Maryland Access to Justice Commission to create the [COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force](#). The task force focused its efforts on the key short-term and long-term civil legal issues created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The task force's [final report](#) included significant legislative and policy recommendations to help Marylanders recover from the impact of COVID-19. One of its key recommendations was to have a “coordinated call to action to increase pro bono services to respond to the spike in civil legal needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.”

All pro bono providers in Maryland are taking part in the call to action. The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland (PBRC) will match attorneys with pro bono organizations across the state to connect attorneys with remote or in-person opportunities. Attorneys interested in participating can visit: <https://www.msba.org/pro-bono-call-to-action>

“As the pro bono arm of the MSBA, PBRC has an over 30-year history of connecting volunteers with pro bono programs across the state,” said Sharon E. Goldsmith, executive director, Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland. “We’ve witnessed the devastation of the past 16 months firsthand in our own courtroom and community clinics, particularly in district court where, four days a week, we help prevent unlawful evictions of tenants as well as in consumer cases where we typically negotiate settlements and avoid wage garnishments or overwhelming financial debt. We are pleased to be facilitating the deployment of lawyers to help those currently facing these and other crises as we anticipate a dramatic spike in the number of Marylanders needing volunteer legal services.”

“COVID-19 has had a devastating impact for so many Marylanders, particularly for communities of color,” said Susan Francis, executive director, Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service. “As COVID becomes less of a health risk, the risk of financial devastation looms large for many families who have suffered job loss, other revenue loss, and increased expenses due to the pandemic. Without pro bono assistance, far too many of these families are at risk of housing and economic destabilization. The Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Services, and other legal services programs, stand ready to help our neighbors get back on their feet. We hope Maryland attorneys will join us.”

“Having had the privilege of serving on the Maryland Attorney General’s COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force and chairing its Pro Bono and Reduced Fee Legal Services Committee, I’ve had a front-row view of the tsunami of need affecting our state’s civil legal services infrastructure resulting from the pandemic,” said Guy Flynn, partner-in-charge, DLA Piper. “The call to action has never been more urgent for lawyers in our state from all backgrounds – private firms, in-house counsel, public sector lawyers, law schools, even retired practitioners – to come together, collaborate, and devote more time, resources, and energy than ever for the benefit of our fellow Marylanders in need. Maryland lawyers already do a lot in the pro bono space, but we must now do even more.”

“Maryland Legal Aid is fortunate to have a deep bench of legal advocates to serve Maryland’s most vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities,” said Wilhelm H. Joseph, Jr., executive Director, Maryland Legal Aid. “The need, however, for free legal assistance is far too great for MLA to do it alone. With support from pro bono attorneys and other volunteers, MLA is able to expand its ability to serve low-income people throughout the state and provide life-changing legal assistance directly in underserved communities, oftentimes in unconventional locations, such as schools, libraries, and places of worship.”

“We are in dire need of attorneys here on the Eastern Shore. Covering such a large geographic area and several counties poses additional challenges to ensure our clients have legal assistance,” said Mid-Shore Pro Bono Executive Director Sandy Brown.

Additionally, as Governor Hogan’s Executive Order prohibiting residential evictions is set to expire on August 15, Attorney General Frosh issued a [Consumer Alert](#) providing Marylanders with available resources and assistance to ensure they stay in their homes. The Maryland Judiciary Forms Subcommittee also revised its Consumer Debt form, adopting several of the recommendations from the Maryland Attorney General’s COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force Debt Subcommittee. The updated form provides guidance to debtors about the options available to debtors before a judgment is issued against them, and provides information about the free legal help available at the Maryland Court Help Center by phone at 410-260-1392 or online at <https://www.mdcourts.gov/helpcenter>.

<https://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/press/2021/070121.pdf>