

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Where does Children's Law Center have the greatest need for pro bono attorneys?

Children's Law Center currently refers three types of cases to pro bono attorneys: Custody Guardian ad litem (C-GAL) cases, caregiver cases, and special education cases. Pro bono attorneys serve more than 350 children every year. All of our cases are designed to provide children in the District of Columbia with the solid foundation of family, health, and education that we believe they need to succeed.

Custody Guardian ad litem (C-GAL)

Pro bono attorneys represent the best interests of children caught in the middle of complex custody disputes between parents or other prospective caregivers. Judges hearing custody cases refer these matters directly to Children's Law Center when the Judge identifies the need for a GAL to represent the child's best interests.

Caregiver Representation

Pro bono attorneys represent caregivers seeking to provide children with permanent homes through adoption, guardianship, or custody. These caregivers include foster parents, grandparents, and other relatives who want to provide loving homes and stability for children who are trapped in the child welfare system or at risk of entering foster care.

Special Education

Pro bono attorneys represent parents of children with special education needs that are not being addressed in the child's current educational environment. These cases may involve obtaining evaluations, advocating for special education services, or challenging denial of services at a due process hearing.

How does Children's Law Center identify pro bono cases?

Cases are referred to us from a variety of sources, including Judges, Guardians ad litem to children in the abuse and neglect system, social workers, other legal services organizations, and prospective clients calling into our Helpline, which is staffed full-time with experienced intake attorneys. Children's Law Center conducts extensive screening before we refer cases to pro bono attorneys.

We send out via email a list of available cases approximately twice a month. Cases are placed with qualified pro bono attorneys on a first-come, first-served basis. Please contact Evelyn Becker if you would like to receive information about available cases.

What training and mentoring does Children’s Law Center offer for pro bono attorneys?

Children’s Law Center regularly conducts training in (1) serving as a Guardian ad litem in custody cases, (2) representing caregivers in adoption, guardianship and custody cases, and (3) representing parents of children with special education needs. Most of these training last four hours, and are conducted at locations around the District. At the training, attorneys receive an extensive reference manual covering the particular subject. Attorneys should attend a relevant training before taking a pro bono case.

Our experienced practitioners also serve as mentors for pro bono attorneys. For C-GAL and caregiver cases, Diane Weinroth and Rebecca Goldfrank serve as mentors. For special education cases, Tracy Goodman and Kathy Zeisel serve as mentors. Together these lawyers bring decades of experience in family and special education law. We do not “co-counsel” with or “supervise” pro bono attorneys, but we are available to discuss strategy, legal issues, and local family court practice. We can also help you identify model pleadings.

In a few cases, Children’s Law Center will have a conflict and will not be able to provide mentoring. Whenever possible, we let pro bono attorneys know in advance when a conflict exists.

What is the typical time commitment?

Every case is unique, but many cases are resolved within six to twelve months and a reasonable estimate is that a case will take 40-80 hours. While it is not always possible to evaluate the complexity of a case during the screening process, we make every effort to let pro bono attorneys know of circumstances that may make a case particularly complex. For example, a contested adoption case will likely require more work than a non-contested case.

What skills are expected? Will I go to trial?

All of our cases involve oral and written advocacy and strong client skills. Some cases are more likely to go to trial or an evidentiary hearing than others. For example, certain contested adoption cases are likely to go to trial, and a special education case where a due process complaint is filed is likely to go to a hearing. In contrast, most (but not all) C-GAL cases settle, placing a premium on negotiation skills. We are happy to talk with you about which cases are most likely to match your skills and interests.

During the screening process, we identify cases as “Beginner,” “Intermediate,” or “Advanced.” These designations reflect our best judgment about the likely complexity and difficulty of the case and whether the case is suitable for an attorney without family law or trial experience.

Can I pair up with another pro bono attorney to handle a case?

Yes. We encourage attorneys to pair up with another attorney in their office. For example, an experienced lawyer might pair up with a less experienced lawyer, or a litigator might pair up with a transactional attorney. In some cases, attorneys practicing in-house at corporate legal departments pair up with an attorney at a law firm.

Do I have to be licensed to practice law in DC?

You must be admitted to practice in the District of Columbia, or be eligible to practice under District of Columbia Court of Appeals Rule 49. Under Rule 49(c):

- attorneys who practice in another jurisdiction may qualify for admission *pro hac vice*;
- federal government employees may be eligible to provide pro bono legal services under the supervision of an active member of the DC Bar;
- attorneys who are eligible to practice in DC under the supervision of a DC Bar member while an application for admission to the DC Bar is pending may be eligible to practice for a limited duration; and
- inactive DC Bar members may be eligible to accept referrals for pro bono cases.

Do I have to be affiliated with a law firm, government, or corporate law department?

While most of our pro bono attorneys are affiliated with a law firm, the federal government, or a corporate law department, we do refer cases to some experienced solo practitioners who have the resources to handle a pro bono case. Evelyn Becker is available to discuss your particular circumstances.

Do I have to carry my own malpractice insurance?

No, Children's Law Center does not require pro bono attorneys to carry malpractice insurance. Our policy covers pro bono attorneys who are not otherwise covered up to \$2 million.

I am not a lawyer—can I still get involved?

Absolutely! For example, legal assistants or other staff can serve a critical role as an investigator or translator on a pro bono matter being handled by an attorney in your office. This may involve attending meetings, locating witnesses, and obtaining documents. It is a great opportunity to get out into the community—you may even have the chance to serve as a witness in a trial or hearing. Children's Law Center also has many volunteer opportunities outside handling a pro bono case. We need volunteers to participate in our annual Holiday Hope Drive, organize our donations closet, assist with large mailings, and provide administrative support.

I want to do pro bono work. What are the next steps?

The best way to get involved is to attend one of our trainings. Check our homepage for upcoming trainings.

I have more questions. Who should I contact?

Contact our Pro Bono Director, Evelyn Becker.