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Success

How participation goals and signature projects helped five firms ramp up their pro bono programs.

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Stories

A LAW FIRM ISN'T THE easiest place to change. Just ask the five firms listed below. About five years ago, each initiated a more formal, rigid approach to its pro bono work. The firms replaced weakly implemented, often unspoken, annual performance expectations with clearly defined, emphatically stated hours-per-lawyer requirements. They created signature pro bono projects that would attract—or at least not frighten—transactions lawyers, and they established committees and hired personnel to support their lofty goals.

They got results: When we compared this year's pro bono score for each Am Law 200 firm with its score five years ago, these were the five firms with the biggest increases. (The score is based on two equally weighted factors—average number of pro bono hours per lawyer and the percentage of lawyers with more than 20 hours of pro bono work.) Here's how they did it:

ROBINS, KAPLAN, MILLER & CIRESI L.L.P. This firm's pro bono score has risen 66 points, from 47.3 in 2005 to 113.3 this year. Pro bono committee chair Anne Lockner points to the Youth Law Initiative, which the firm started in each of its offices in 2005, as a big reason for the jump. The program provides legal representation to children and teens who are victims of abuse, homelessness, or neglect. Juveniles are "a group that seems to fall between the cracks" in the court system, Lockner says.

Last year, attorneys in the firm's Minneapolis office spent 4,470 hours advocating for guardians *ad litem* to represent the best interests of children in the juvenile and family courts through the Minnesota Guardian Ad Litem Program. "The Youth Law Initiative has provided for a lot of hours—lots of very successful hours," says Lockner.

In one especially high-profile case last year, lawyers from Robins, Kaplan's Minneapolis office logged 496

hours representing a guardian *ad litem* for Daniel Hauser, a 13-year-old boy in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, whose mother had taken him to California after a judge ordered the child to receive chemotherapy to treat Hodgkin's lymphoma. (Hauser's parents had asserted that the treatment interfered with their religious beliefs.) Hauser has since completed chemotherapy and is said to be doing well.

In addition to initiating the Youth Law Initiative, Robins, Kaplan has reemphasized its policy regarding the required number of pro bono hours. Every lawyer is expected to complete 50 hours of pro bono work each year, says Lockner. This goal was put in writing for the first time last July. (In 2009 the firm's lawyers recorded an average of 137.3 pro bono hours.) "Everyone knows what's expected of them now," says Lockner. "They know they have an obligation to the community and to the firm."

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