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Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission Launches COVID-19 Pro Bono Portal

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

6/22/2020

Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission

Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court

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BOSTON, MA — The Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission's COVID-19 Task Force Pro Bono Committee has launched the **COVID-19 Pro Bono Portal** (https://massprobono.org/covidprobono/), a collaborative, statewide tool connecting attorneys and law students to pandemic-related pro bono opportunities that serve low-income residents of the Commonwealth.

The COVID-19 Pro Bono Portal will allow legal services organizations to publicize pandemic- related legal needs to attorneys and law students willing and ready to assist in these frontline efforts. The COVID-19 Portal is housed at the Volunteer Lawyers Project at **MassProBono.org** (https://massprobono.org/), a website developed ten years ago and dedicated to facilitating and enhancing the delivery of pro bono civil legal aid to persons of limited means. The launch of the COVID-19 Pro Bono Portal will make it easier for legal services organizations to match volunteer attorneys and law students, who can get started working right away, with pro bono clients.

"Thanks to the tremendous skills and dedication of our volunteers, and the collaboration among the bar associations and the Massachusetts legal community, the Task Force has been able to accomplish much in a very short time," said Supreme Judicial Court Chief Justice Ralph D. Gants, who co-chairs the Access to Justice Commission. "Now is the time for all members of the Bar to come together to provide pro bono representation to the Commonwealth's most vulnerable residents, ensuring that our community's legal needs are met. The Commission is pleased to announce the launch of this statewide pro bono portal initiative."

Over the past three months, the Pro Bono Committee of Access to Justice Commission's COVID-19 Task Force has reached out to legal services organizations to assess emerging legal needs and develop a portal. To date, the COVID-19 Task Force has collaborated with 42 organizations and helped facilitate the development of 15 pro bono projects.

"This pandemic has magnified the racial disparities in our communities and further highlighted the critical nature of providing frontline legal services and advocacy through legal aid and also, importantly, through pro bono service," says Susan Finegan, Pro Bono Partner at Mintz Levin and Co-Chair of the Access to Justice Commission. "Through this initiative, attorneys and law students can easily identify remote pro bono opportunities and utilize their skills to provide assistance to those in need."

The Access to Justice Commission, appointed by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, seeks to improve access to justice for people who are unable to afford an attorney for essential civil legal needs, such as cases involving housing, consumer debt, and family law. The Commission's COVID-19 Task Force was established in March to foster collaboration and marshal resources to assist people with their pandemic-related legal needs statewide. It is comprised of volunteer representatives from legal services, law firm pro bono programs, law schools, the court system, social services organizations, the Massachusetts Bar Association, and the Boston Bar Association.

The Pro Bono Committee is led by Elizabeth Ennen, Director of Northeastern University School of Law's Program on Human Rights and the Global Economy and chair of the SJC Standing Committee on Pro Bono Legal Services; Mia Friedman, Pro Bono Manager at Fish & Richardson P.C.; and Meredith Palmer, Pro Bono Director at Community Legal Aid.

In addition to the Pro Bono Committee, the COVID-19 Task Force has two other committees, the Access to the Courts Committee and the Materials and Communication Committee. The Access to Courts Committee, focusing on the areas of housing, consumer debt, and family law, works collaboratively with the courts to address barriers for court users in remote proceedings. This Committee has also cooperated with the Suffolk Legal Innovation and Technology Lab in its project to develop online guided interviews and fillable forms to assist self-represented litigants in accessing the courts.

The Materials and Communications Committee promotes the development and distribution of information to social service advocates and self-represented litigants on pandemic-related law and legal procedures. Resources for residents seeking legal information on a wide range of civil legal issues can be found **here** (https://www.masslegalservices.org/massachusetts-legal-help-resources-during-covid-19). This Committee has also held three virtual question and answer sessions for over 700 social service advocates on areas including housing, working with immigrant communities, and family law.

For more information contact Carolyn Goodwin, Director, Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission by email at **cgoodwin@mlac.org** (mailto:cgoodwin@mlac.org).

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