



# Practicing Community Service

By Andréa L. Maddan

*I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver.*

—Maya Angelou

**M**any of us have seen or heard the term “sharing is caring” directed at young children to help them learn the value of altruism. However, it’s an important concept that we should revisit in the context of our often fast-paced legal careers. One of the most fulfilling things you can do as an attorney is share your time and knowledge with your community. It’s not just about doing incredibly important pro bono work. Engaging with the community in the following ways likely won’t feel like “work” at all.

## MENTORING

Growing up, I did not know any lawyers personally, but I understood “lawyer” to be associated with the idea of success, and I wanted to be “successful.” I had to find out for myself what being an attorney truly meant, and there is a lot I wish I had known along the way. Don’t you?

Many middle and high schools have programs specifically designed to fill in that gap by introducing students to careers in the law and helping interested students learn about the path to becoming

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a lawyer. The biggest impact often comes from the engagement of attorneys who can provide real-world context. For some students, you may be the first attorney they get an opportunity to know. While students can certainly search the Internet for various opinions on what it's like to be a lawyer, it will not compare to the impact of having direct access to an attorney committed to lighting their path forward. Interacting with someone who shares your aspirations while perhaps also sharing your background, culture, religion, gender, or other important quality helps students expand their ideas about what is possible for them and instills the confidence and knowledge to turn possibility into reality.

As an added bonus, you might find that you're enlightening the teachers and administrators that you engage with in the process as well.

If you're not already aware of any mentoring opportunities, consider reaching out to your alma mater, your children's schools, or local middle and high schools to see if they have or are interested in starting such a mentoring program.

## MEDIATION

Courts across the county are increasingly encouraging litigants to engage in mediation before being heard by a judge. This significantly helps the court address backlogs, and many cases come to a resolution through mediation. However, the number of cases can still be overwhelming. Even with cases outside our normal practice area, we can help. Stepping in as a neutral party with legal training, we are uniquely equipped to volunteer

and help mediate cases. We can assess issues and ask questions that allow the parties to express their feelings, discover underlying interests and concerns, and find out what they agree on. Afterward, the parties tend to be more amenable to settlement. Mediating a dispute sometimes feels like being placed into the middle of a boxing ring. However, there's something about the

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parties knowing you're an attorney that actually keeps anybody from swinging. You're more likely to find parties willing and ready to defer to your instructions. While we must remain neutral, we can provide helpful information and resources that can leave litigants feeling better able to navigate the dispute and come to a resolution on their own. Mediation also releases the pressure many people feel being in the courtroom before a judge. Acting in the role of peacemaker allows us to serve not only the community but also the profession by increasing trust in the judicial system.

In some jurisdictions, serving as a mediator for matters such as small claims or landlord-tenant disputes requires no specific qualifications other than being a practicing attorney in good standing. In other jurisdictions, local courts may require that you complete approved mediation training.

You should reach out to your local courts to determine the availability and requirements for volunteering as a mediator.

## VOLUNTEERING FOR A NONPROFIT

We all should engage in pro bono work, but we are not limited to volunteering legal services. Consider what you are passionate about and search



for organizations that align with your values. Some volunteer activities might be:

- Cleaning up a local park.
- Sending care packages to troops overseas.
- Visiting local nursing homes or senior centers and doing activities with residents such as reading, puzzles, or having lunch.
- Serving at homeless shelters.
- Helping a home construction organization.

By volunteering for nonprofit organizations, we help them function at their highest level and provide for an abundance of needs. Some nonprofits may invite you to serve on their board, even if in a nonlegal role. Fully supported nonprofits can help mitigate some of the legal issues that would arise in our communities but for the work that these organizations do.

To find these opportunities, consider contacting your local



bar association, using a volunteer site, or asking friends and family. Keep in mind some of the best opportunities may be with smaller organizations that will be new to you.

### PRESENTING A “CLE”: COMMUNITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE

We all are probably familiar with attending or participating in programs where we learn from or teach our colleagues about our practice areas. However, the community benefits by learning from us as well.



with knowledge they didn't know they needed filled my soul. It may do the same for you.

Even if you think there's no demand for public knowledge about your particular practice area, consider that we don't know what we don't know until we need to know it, and we rarely discover new interests without first being exposed to them. There's value in volunteering the information. Although you may not get “CLE” credits or a check for this type of teaching, the benefits of educating others are long-lasting.

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A few years ago, I was invited to participate in an outreach program with my local county surrogate's office. The goal of the outreach was to help community members understand what the surrogate's office is and how to navigate the surrogate's court system should the attendees or their families need to do so. During the question-and-answer portion of the program, I realized that some information that had felt so obvious to me was novel and complicated for the audience. I saw faces light up when I explained this information and spoke to people who now felt empowered by what they had learned. I didn't really consider whether any business would come from the program, and it became irrelevant. Pouring into others and leaving them armed

Check in with nonlegal groups you may already be a part of, such as alumni associations, local chapters of sororities and fraternities, religious organizations, social-service groups and clubs, or others. They can help you gauge members' interest in allowing you to do a presentation on your area of expertise. The presentation can be as simple as a Zoom hour sharing information and answering questions.

You can also contact your local court to see if it needs volunteers for community outreach or if it's open to starting such a program.

When participating in this type of community service, be sure to make it clear that any information you're providing is general in nature and that you're not providing legal advice or

establishing an attorney-client relationship. However, be prepared to extend your service to the community as a referral source.

### BEING AN EXCELLENT REFERRAL SOURCE

In addition to appreciating the wealth of critical knowledge we carry, we need to remember that the broader community—and even our neighbors and friends—may not know as many lawyers and legal resources as we do. We can serve the community by being an excellent resource for referrals. Again, the Internet offers a wealth of information, but you may have found that people are more appreciative of and likely to act on referrals they receive from someone they already trust. If we can't help someone directly, the next best thing we can do is provide direct access to someone or a resource that can meet their legal needs with little delay.

We all have experienced making or receiving a referral in our personal if not our professional lives. How often or well do you keep track of these referrals? Consider building a new habit into your practice of diligently documenting the network of people you meet and the resources you come across. This might look like an Excel sheet or other document or phone application that records not only a contact's name, email, and phone number but also the person's location and practice area/specialty. No matter how much we like our colleagues, it can be difficult to remember everyone's practice areas, and we miss opportunities for meaningful referrals.

Sometimes, we need to refer individuals to state and local agencies. Are we knowledgeable enough about their services to properly direct people who may ask? If we are, we can often save members of the community from wasting time and money and experiencing the anxiety that comes from not knowing where to turn.

## FACILITATING OR PARTICIPATING IN DONATIONS

Every year during the holidays, I look forward to an email from a well-known attorney in my community inviting her fellow colleagues to donate toys to kids at a local center who might not otherwise receive gifts. If you are aware of similar opportunities in your community, I encourage you to participate. It takes only a few moments to review a child's or family's wish list and order gifts online. (Certainly, you could, and should, take it further by personally delivering the gifts if circumstances allow.) Your few moments and gifts could be life changing for the recipients.

Of course, such opportunities are not limited to the holidays, and there are many other ways you can make and collect donations for any charitable purpose at any time. Here are a few to think about:

- Make a monetary donation to a nonprofit or community organization.
- Host a charity fundraiser in your community.
- Host a fundraising run/walk/cycling event.
- Plan a crafting contest where all the items created by participants are then donated.
- Plan an office blood drive.

- Plan a canned food drive.
- Promote a GoFundMe campaign for someone in need.
- Collect and donate school supplies.
- Collect unused makeup to donate to domestic violence shelters.

## PASSING THE WORD

If you participate in or learn of opportunities to participate in any of the above, share this information with colleagues, friends,

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and family. Just as with referrals for professional services, others are more likely to engage in activities they learn of from a trusted source. Share opportunities via social media, listservs, newsletters, and group messages to encourage even more people to get involved.

## THE WHY

We all have the power to deepen our commitment to helping our communities flourish and prosper on a local to global scale. As attorneys, we can help our communities by improving the

community beyond what has been discussed here.

For some, it may feel hard to prioritize the non-billable work of helping the community. Although we may no longer be at the peak of the pandemic, our profession continues to experience heightened levels of mental health challenges and loneliness. Serving our community in ways that don't feel like work helps us to reduce stress, live in the present, learn valuable nonlegal skills, embrace new and authentic relationships, and renew our attitude of gratitude. ■



**Andréa L. Maddan** ([andrea@maddan-law.com](mailto:andrea@maddan-law.com)) is an attorney who is passionate about educating, empowering, and serving the community. As a "momprenuer," Andréa manages and dedicates her practice to providing counsel on business law and estate planning. She also enjoys family time, listening to music, and trying new restaurants. Andréa is inspired and supported by her faith in God, her supportive husband, her phenomenal daughters, and an amazing and undeniable village.