



HOLISTIC PRO BONO TO HELP THE HOMELESS

Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of Pillsbury

Caitlin Flammer

Pillsbury practice assistant Donna Hunter was working through a DMV ID renewal application with a man who was quiet, polite, and young enough to be a grandson. When asked his place of residence, the young man responded “a tent on Turk Street.”

Fifteen minutes later, he had a completed voucher and application entitling him to a free California ID card. Donna still wonders how that gracious young man came to live on the street, but she knows that those fifteen minutes could potentially help him secure a job, receive government benefits, get healthcare services, or open a bank account, and make a path to a better life.

Bay Area residents are aware of the urgency of the region’s homelessness problem; San Francisco’s 2019 homeless count increased by 17% from 2017 to 2019. Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman witnessed this problem—in San Francisco and other cities where the law firm has offices—and decided to do something about it. In 2018, Pillsbury formed a Homelessness Initiative task force to provide comprehensive legal assistance to address homelessness to mark the firm’s 150th anniversary. Pillsbury’s initiative is firm-wide, with buy-in from every office. “We wanted to give back and honor the strong relationships our offices have with their communities, and do something the entire firm could participate in,” explains Blaine Green, a partner in the San Francisco office and Chair of the firm’s Pro Bono Committee.

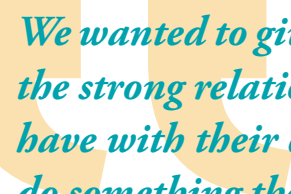
Pillsbury’s Homelessness Initiative provides an excellent example of utilizing pro bono work to address a social problem, applying a holistic approach and bringing in every legal professional including paralegals, legal assistants, and attorneys. Pillsbury has worked closely with the Justice & Diversity Center to develop their San Francisco strategy, while also partnering with other organizations including Glide, Larkin Street Youth Services, the Eviction Defense Collaborative and United Way. The initiative’s four-pronged approach includes:

helping unsheltered San Franciscans obtain free legal advice and government IDs through Project Homeless Connect, assisting homeless and at-risk clients to apply for disability benefits so they can make payments on subsidized housing, advising nonprofit organizations that serve low-income communities on business matters, and preventing tenant evictions through the eviction defense project.

Project Homeless Connect is a large, quarterly service fair for homeless people in San Francisco usually held at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium. Pillsbury volunteers work alongside many other legal professionals to conduct legal intake, provide legal advice, and help clients fill out California ID vouchers and applications which are processed by the DMV on-site.

The Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) provides legal services and supporting social services to individuals and families in San Francisco who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. 74% of those surveyed in the 2019 homeless count said they lived with at least one serious health condition. By volunteering with HAP, Pillsbury paralegals, legal assistants, and attorneys help clients with SSI applications and eligibility reviews. SSI provides a small amount of cash assistance to those unable to work because of age or disability, which can allow clients to cover basic necessities needed to survive or make payments on subsidized housing. One Pillsbury volunteer helped fix a filing error that had locked the client out of the social security system.

There are hundreds of nonprofits in the Bay Area providing services and assistance to homeless and at-risk populations in



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the Bay Area, working with a small staff to achieve big goals. Through the Community Organization Representation Project (CORP), Pillsbury volunteers work with JDC to provide those nonprofits with much-needed legal counsel for a range of issues, including employment, real estate, tax, business contracts, intellectual property, corporate governance and more.

In 2019, eviction was the third leading cause of homelessness in San Francisco; 13% of those surveyed in the homeless count cited eviction as their primary reason for experiencing homelessness. As part of its Homelessness Initiative, Pillsbury lawyers have collaborated with the JDC and (currently) the Eviction Defense Collaborative in representing tenants facing eviction at their mandatory pre-trial settlement conferences.

“It’s daunting to take on an issue like homelessness. You see the statistics and reporting in the media, and it sometimes seems like it’s all bad news but, numbers aside, lawyers can really help” says Blaine Green. He recalled speaking with a client

who had been living in their vehicle, and faced a crisis when it was towed one day. The client was up against a bureaucracy they perceived as impossible to navigate in order to recover their shelter. “As a lawyer, to help this client get past all of that, that was incredibly gratifying. When you’re doing the work, you can see how you’re making an impact on the individual.”

If you’re interested in learning more about pro bono opportunities with the Justice & Diversity Center, please contact Jay Lee, Pro Bono Manager, at probono@sfbbar.org.

Caitlin Flammer is the Volunteer and Clinics Coordinator at the Justice & Diversity Center of the Bar Association of San Francisco (JDC). She connects volunteers to JDC’s pro bono projects.

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For information and scheduling, please contact Joanna Barron at Joanna@adrservices.com