



**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**MAJORITY OF PRO BONO LEGAL WORK BY LAW FIRMS IS  
DONE FOR ORGANISATIONS**

Over 60 percent of the pro bono work undertaken by large law firms is for organisations rather than individuals, according to the Final Report on the National Law Firm Pro Bono Survey 2012, released today by the National Pro Bono Resource Centre.

Four of the five areas of law and practice where most pro bono services were provided are only relevant to the legal needs of organisations: governance, deductible gift recipient (DGR) applications, commercial agreements and incorporations. The report also highlights family law (other than domestic violence), employment law, wills/probate/estate law and criminal law, as the top practice areas where firms rejected requests for pro bono assistance in the last financial year.

“By doing work for not-for-profit or community organisations, firms are not only efficiently using their resources, given their expertise in these areas, but also supporting these organisations so they can use their resources to assist those in need, rather than pay for legal services” said John Corker, Director of the Centre. “It also shows that most pro bono work done by the larger firms is not a substitute for legal aid which almost exclusively provides legal support for individuals, and in limited circumstances and areas like criminal and family law where large firms do not generally have expertise”.

However there is evidence to suggest that even in some areas of core law firm expertise, unmet legal need remains high. For example employment law and DGR applications were identified as areas where pro bono assistance is frequently provided but also frequently rejected in both the 2012 survey and the last biennial survey conducted in 2010.

“In order to prioritise limited pro bono capacity, firms with an increased emphasis on undertaking pro bono work for organisations should be skilled at working out which organisations they should assist, and on what basis. Best practice guidelines in this area, that have regard to the mission, management and financial resources of an organisation, could be useful to many firms”, said Corker.

Thirty-six of the 51 firms in Australia, which have 50 or more lawyers, participated in the survey, including all nine of the largest national firms. Results were based on 2011/2012 data.

**Partner and management support is vital**

Partner and management support was nominated as the most crucial factor in the success of a pro bono program. Other factors identified as crucial included effective coordination of the program within the firm, strong commitment of individual lawyers to the pro bono ethos, and the capacity of the firm to undertake the work.

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“Effective coordination of a pro bono program is also important in light of the survey finding that less than half of all pro bono work undertaken by the firms was received from formal pro bono referral schemes, clearing houses, and community legal centres, with many firms receiving direct requests for assistance as well as generating pro bono work through their own projects and relationships”, said Corker.

The survey results also provide an indication of specific measures that have been successful in encouraging the provision of pro bono work in Australia, namely firms having their own internal targets for the amount of pro bono work they undertake, the National Pro Bono Aspirational Target (of at least 35 hours per lawyer per annum), as well as the pro bono conditions in the Commonwealth and Victorian Government tender schemes.

The full survey report provides general statistics on pro bono legal work, information on coordination and organisation of pro bono within firms, key issues affecting the provision of pro bono work, external influences on the definition, culture, amount and reporting of pro bono, and data on pro bono in specific contexts such as the regional rural remote and international contexts.

To access the report in full see [www.nationalprobono.org.au](http://www.nationalprobono.org.au)

## **Backgrounder**

The interim survey report published by the Centre in October 2012 revealed that the thirty-two firms that provided data on pro bono hours undertook more than 343,058 hours of pro bono legal work in the 2011/2012 financial year, or an average of 29.9 hours per lawyer, up 0.9 hours from 2010.

Many firms reported operating with a reduced number of lawyers as a result of the GFC, and 12 of the 36 reporting firms had merged or joined with another firm in the last two years. However, the interim report indicated that the pro bono contribution of law firms has remained steady, with the longstanding and well established pro bono practices providing the majority of the work.

The legal sector has also experienced rapid growth in the number of law firms with between 50-350 full-time equivalent (FTE) lawyers, which has led to the emergence of a new group of firms in the early stages of developing their pro bono programs. The report showed that some of these firms have made considerable progress in a short period of time.

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