
Washington DC Office Partners with Community Organizations

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WilmerHale's commitment to pro bono and community service stretches back to the earliest days of its two predecessor firms, embodied in the work of innovators like Reginald Heber Smith, who is widely considered the father of legal aid in the United States, and John Pickering, who led the effort to establish the Pro Bono Institute's Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge. Today the firm continues to honor the legacy of its founders through initiatives that bring attorneys and staff together as volunteers in the communities where they live and work. The Washington DC office recently established two exciting new community partnerships, [Bread for the City](#) and the [Maya Angelou Public Charter School](#), which maximize the impact of the firm's philanthropy and service in the critical areas of education and homelessness.

By instituting a focused philanthropy model, the firm has been able to concentrate its resources and time on a smaller group of organizations, with an eye toward long-term relationships and capacity building, rather than making smaller monetary donations to a wide variety of organizations. The model includes a renewable, multi-year financial commitment, pro bono legal representation, volunteer service and in-kind donations agreed upon by the firm and the participating organizations.

The mission of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School (MAPCS) is to "create learning communities in lower income urban areas where all students, particularly those who have not succeeded in traditional schools, can reach their potential." WilmerHale's attorneys and staff have been tutoring MAPCS students since 2006 and, in view of the success of the tutoring program, the firm has scaled up its support of MAPCS.

"When we first started, we had about eight tutors going to the school every week," says Program Coordinator and Legal Secretary Henrietta Jessie. "Last semester, we had close to 60 tutors on the roster, and an average of about 30 a week would participate." Jessie says that bussing the students to the firm—as opposed to sending the tutors to the MAPCS campus, which was done in the first semester—offers more convenience to busy attorneys and staff, increasing participation.

From 6:15 to 7:15 p.m. each Monday, attorneys and staff meet with students—this semester is focused on 10th graders—to review their work in English, math, history and science, and, according to Jessie, the volunteers are enthusiastic and energetic in their roles.

“Though from humble beginnings myself, I cannot imagine dealing with many of the issues the exceptional young woman I tutored faced,” says Staff Attorney [Gayle Terry](#). “Through the efforts of staff attorney Tanikia Roberts Head and myself, our student found innovative ways to improve her spelling and written expression. I am so proud of her.”

For Cameron Wakefield, a project assistant in the litigation department, the experience illustrates how WilmerHale fits into the greater community. “Our law firm is a part of an even larger community. Though the differences between a law firm and sometimes struggling public schools can seem stark, when tutors and scholars work together we diminish those differences and improve our community.”

Terry agrees. “I am delighted to work for a firm that not only speaks of service to the community, but puts actions to those words. I am able to contribute to our larger community because my law firm community not only recognizes, but encourages these contributions.”

In another new partnership, members of the DC office have eagerly pitched in to help Bread for the City in its efforts to combat hunger and homelessness. This summer, Partners [Russell Bruemmer](#) and [Christopher Wilber](#), Counsel Ariel Waldman, Project Manager Richard Palmer, Career Development Manager Cheryl Shigo and Litigation Support Manager Scott Collister, who serve as the firm's “liaisons” to Bread for the City, led an inaugural food drive that far exceeded the goal set for monetary and food donations.

“Bread for the City suggested that a successful food drive would be 20 boxes of food,” says Palmer. “We got double that. And we hoped to get \$6,000 in monetary donations, but we got somewhere in the neighborhood of \$8,200.”

“One wonderful aspect to our work with Bread for the City is that it allows participation by everyone within the firm and allows people to contribute in any way that fits their talents and time,” says Bruemmer.

Bruemmer notes that the organization seeks to provide not just food for calories, but food that is healthy for the recipients and supports sustainable local agriculture, two very important goals in the present environment.

But there is more to the partnership than food and monetary donations. The legal services department of Bread for the City and WilmerHale attorneys will discuss ways the firm might provide legal services to the organization as well as to the organization's constituents on housing, landlord/tenant and social security issues.

“Having such a highly publicized and visual experience like the food drive helps people realize that they are part of a larger community, which is something that tends to get lost in hectic schedules,” says Palmer. “It's also important that both attorneys and staff are participating ... The food drive was a good community building experience among the personnel at the firm.”

As the legacy of Smith, Pickering and countless others who have dedicated their time to pro bono and community service echoes through WilmerHale, it is clear that today's generation of attorneys

and staff are shaping their own legacy through these partnerships.