Pro Bono Firm Of 2014: Jenner & Block

By Lisa Ryan

Law360, New York (October 09, 2014, 7:06 PM ET) -- Jenner & Block LLP continued its dedication to pro bono work this year, with its attorneys devoting thousands of hours to an array of issues, from bringing electricity to East Africa to litigating housing cases that positively impact low-income tenants, garnering the firm a spot on Law360's list of top pro bono firms of 2014.

With 435 attorneys working in the firm’s offices across the U.S., Jenner & Block logged 75,798 hours of pro bono work between June 2013 and June 2014, averaging out to around 181 hours per attorney, the firm said. This is the fifth consecutive year the firm has been recognized by Law360 for its outstanding commitment to pro bono work.

Andrew W. Vail, a partner in Jenner & Block’s Chicago office and co-chair of the firm’s pro bono committee, told Law360 that 87 percent of the firm’s attorneys contributed more than 20 hours to pro bono work in 2013.

“There is a firm policy that we ask that attorneys commit at least 20 hours to pro bono work, but as you’ve seen from our average of 180 hours per attorney, most of our attorneys go above and beyond that,” Vail said.

Pro bono work is part of the firm’s DNA, according to Vail. The pro bono committee was established in the early 1950s when a handful of young associates — including former partner and U.S. District Judge Prentice H. Marshall, current partner and former U.S. Attorney Thomas P. Sullivan and former chairman Jerry Solovy — became active members of the Chicago Bar Association’s Defence of Prisoners Committee, Vail said.

“It has grown and continued ever since then,” Vail said. “[Named founder] Albert Jenner was a strong supporter of pro bono work, and it has remained part of the fabric of the firm.”

The firm encourages its attorneys to take on pro bono cases but doesn’t dictate what that work entails, Vail says. Though there is a process and committee for approving pro bono work, Jenner & Block largely allows its attorneys to decide what cases and projects they want to devote their time to.

Patrick J. Trostle, a partner with the firm, echoed Vail’s statement. He told Law360 that the firm routinely represents pro bono clients, both big and small, on a wide variety of cases. The firm has represented individuals who were wrongfully accused of crimes or involved in other matters requiring sophisticated legal representation, and has also worked on international transactional matters.
“It’s very important for us to do more in our profession than simply bill the work,” Trostle said. “We as a firm believe very strongly that we are professionals, not businesspeople, and think it’s extremely important to give away legal services to individuals and entities in need.”

Trostle and the late Jerry J. Burgdoerfer, a former partner with the firm, spent much of the past year leading a team of 15 attorneys in a transaction to develop the largest solar energy facility in Central Africa, which began running last week and now provides much-needed energy to parts of Rwanda as well as funding for the education and housing of over 500 orphans of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

The firm became involved with the project after Trostle met the late philanthropist Anne Heyman, who developed the nonprofit Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village, an organization that operates the residential community in rural Rwanda.

Trostle and Heyman crossed paths while working with the Clinton Global Initiative, and began talking about green energy and the region’s serious need for access to electricity. The region would benefit from the development of a solar facility on the village’s 144-acre campus, they decided, with Trostle bringing the idea back to his cohorts at the firm for approval.

“As I expected, Jenner & Block thought this was a great idea. A lot of what we do on the pro bono side is more litigation focused, so we’re always looking for a really good transactional assignment so that our transactional lawyers can work on pro bono matters as well,” he said.

With the firm’s backing, the complex project, which would have otherwise required very extensive legal fees, was able to get off the ground. Trostle and his team dedicated 914 hours representing Agahozo-Shalom in structuring, negotiating and documenting financing from foreign investors.

The project required the negotiation with a land lease for the construction of the solar field on 20 acres of the property, Trostle said. The team also had to negotiate a land lease with the provider of the solar panels, Gigawatt Global, in the Netherlands, represented in the deal by Norton Rose in London, as well as the parties providing financing for the project, represented by Allen & Overy in Paris.

“It truly was a global effort,” Trostle said.

The lease was signed in January, and financing on the project closed in February. And since the site opened last week, it has begun producing a maximum of 8.5 megawatts of electricity, and now currently provides eight to ten percent of all grid-connected electricity in the country, according to the attorney.

Closer to home, in November the firm also negotiated a landmark settlement for tenants of a Section 8 housing complex that the city of Joliet, Illinois, was seeking to condemn and demolish, in City of Joliet v. Mid-City National Bank of Chicago.

Jenner & Block spent nearly 7,000 hours representing the tenants in the suit, including 95 days of trials over the course of 15 months, the firm said. The litigation team on the suit was led by partner Reena R. Bajowala, with settlement negotiations led by former partner Jeffrey S. Eberhard. The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law served as co-counsel in the suit, as well.

The tenants intervened in the lawsuit over the seven-building complex, home to mostly low-income families headed by single African-American mothers with young children. The firm said the case raised
an important question about federal housing policy: If the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development determines that a Section 8 facility is necessary — which it had in this instance — can a municipality utilize eminent domain to condemn the property without further use?

Bajowala said that, in the settlement, the firm was able to get the city to give a commitment that it won’t eliminate the housing development.

“The settlement accomplished what we set out to, which was securing stable and safe housing for [our] clients and maximizing the number of affordable housing units that stayed in the city of Joliet,” she said.

The settlement was the result of extensive hours and resources donated by the firm, and Bajowala says it’s merely another example of Jenner & Block’s dedication to pro bono work.

“It exhibits the depths of the commitment,” Bajowala said. “We had a large team of attorneys working on this, and the firm really provided just as many resources as they would for any other case.”

Bajowala adds that she started out working on the suit as an associate, cutting down on her billable hours in order to litigate the suit, but midway between the first year of discovery in 2012 and when the trial started in 2013, she was promoted to partner. The attorney says it’s a testament to the firm’s passion for pro bono matters.

Vail echoed Bajowala’s statement, saying the firm really valued the time and effort spent working on the pro bono suit.

“I think that Reena and the other Jenner & Block lawyers brought the type of skill and dedication to the table that often allows us to obtain successful results for our clients,” Vail said.

--Editing by Mark Lebetkin.

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