

YOUNG LAWYERS

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THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Civic engagement benefits young lawyers personally and professionally.

Civic engagement provides an opportunity to develop and use one's knowledge, skills and voice to promote positive change in the community. Community service provides individuals the opportunity to help those in need and to have a lasting, positive impact on society. Neither civic engagement nor community service is a necessary component to the practice of law, but both can benefit young and seasoned attorneys alike. Community involvement, whether service-focused or not, has benefits beyond that of making a young lawyer "feel good." While community service will undoubtedly benefit society, it will also bring incredible tangible benefits to young lawyers who are driven to participate.

Lawyers who volunteer in their community can sharpen leadership, communication and decision-making skills, all while networking

and building confidence. Hannah West, a young lawyer in Wood County, is a member of the LEAD State Leadership Team, is on the Fellowship Home Board of Directors in her community and serves on the Parkersburg Area Community Foundation's Scholarship Selection Committee. Hannah's advice to young lawyers is to "get to know the individuals you encounter, from clients to court staff, to judges and the local members of the bar, and do not stop there."

"Get to know business owners and leaders in the community too," she says, "because this will undoubtedly open new doors and opportunities — and it never hurts to 'know someone who knows someone.' Be friendly, genuine and approachable because even a five-minute conversation can benefit you in more ways than you know."

Volunteer work and community

service also expose young lawyers to other attorneys in the community. If a young lawyer's work consists primarily of research and writing, he or she may rarely get the opportunity to see opposing counsel or appear in court. Volunteering on a committee or serving on a board of directors with fellow attorneys in the area can serve as a networking opportunity and a chance to show off one's strengths and skills.

Community service or volunteer work does not have to involve legal representation or even legal concepts and can still be a great benefit to a young lawyer. Every hour spent in one's community can expand relationships with individuals in said community. Those individuals can be future clients, sources of business and referrals, resources for information and friends.

In addition to gaining new prospective clients or building new

business, a young lawyer's civic engagement can benefit current clients as well. For example, a young assistant prosecutor might volunteer at a battered women's shelter, thus gaining insight into available resources to share with victim advocates and victims. An assistant public defender could volunteer to serve on the board of directors at a local recovery facility, gaining resources for current and future clients in need of treatment. These are just some of the potential benefits that civic engagement provides to young lawyers and their clients.

Community involvement does not have to be boring or laborious. There are a multitude of fun and exciting ways to become involved in one's community.

The West Virginia State Bar

A great way for young attorneys to become involved is to pay attention to the Bar Blast emails from the West Virginia State Bar. Information regarding the annual meeting, CLE opportunities and updates from around the State can often be found in these emails. Additionally, the West Virginia State Bar website provides information regarding the Board of Governors and the Young Lawyer Board, both of which are excellent ways for attorneys to become involved. District representatives for the Board of Governors and the Young Lawyer Board are located throughout the State and can be a great resource for attorneys seeking civic engagement. Reach out to your district representative on the Board of Governors or Young Lawyer Board, or both, to find ways to become more involved. Contact information can be found on the State Bar website at www.wvbar.org.

Volunteering

Volunteering is a great way to become involved, but it can be a bit overwhelming because there are so many options. The first thing to do is to find something that sparks interest or passion. Again, this does not have to be related to one's law practice or even legally motivated. For example, serving on the board of directors of a nonprofit not only helps one become involved in the community, but also allows one to participate in improving the community. Justin Williams, a young lawyer in Kanawha County, serves as president of the Board of Directors for Covenant House, West Virginia. "It allows

me to give back to my community both by working with the staff and other board members on important issues in the community and understanding the inner workings of these types of organizations," Justin says of his work with Covenant House. "Additionally, it gives me the opportunity to grow my network of professional colleagues and have meaningful conversations about important issues."

Justin says he would encourage other young lawyers to volunteer or join local community organizations because "it is important to participate in community groups to make them better places to live."

Join an Organization

Any organizational involvement is a networking prospect and may provide opportunities for community involvement. Local bar associations allow individuals to get to know fellow attorneys, judges and court staff. Young lawyers should be encouraged to run for office locally and should not be afraid to organize and plan activities themselves. If a local bar association is not particularly active, it is fine to take charge. Plan a happy hour for other young lawyers in the area or organize a CLE, for example. Joining other community organizations is important too. If your area has a local Junior League, Kiwanis Club, Lions Club, Rotary Club or downtown revitalization group, these might be organizations outside the legal community that would provide opportunities to young lawyers. Habitat for Humanity, local animal shelters and recovery centers are often looking for volunteers and are just a few examples of community service opportunities.

However, young lawyers choose to become civically engaged, the benefits and rewards are both tangible and intangible. Of course, volunteering and working in one's community provides a sense of purpose, confidence and self-worth; but community involvement also brings with it new clients, job opportunities and sources of business. Young lawyers can make their communities better while improving their professional lives. And while additional time devoted to community service may seem daunting, it is worth the effort, especially for attorneys trying to distinguish themselves from their peers. **WVL**