

Troubleshooting Pro Bono Relationships with Low-Income Clients

Thank you for taking on a pro bono eviction matter on behalf of a low-income Coloradan! Most volunteers report that their pro bono work is among the most meaningful and we hope that is true for you as well. Any new client relationship presents challenges for both the attorney and the client. Pro bono cases are no different. We hope that by identifying some common pitfalls you can avoid some of these situations and enhance the experience for both you and the client.

Colorado Legal Services clients are by definition low-income. What does low-income mean? In 2020, the federal poverty line is under \$ 13,000 for an individual. CLS's clients are mostly below 125% of the poverty line. Surviving on this amount is very difficult and can create challenges for clients when accessing and utilizing legal aid. Those challenges can sometimes lead to misunderstandings between counsel and client. Some common ones are described below, along with tips on how to deal with them.

Whatever challenges you face, remember that CLS is here to support you in assisting clients. So do not hesitate to reach out to Jen Cuesta at jcuesta@colegalserv.org for support with your eviction case or client.

1. Communication

Many clients are not familiar with the legal system, or may have had limited schooling, or English is not their first language. Others are elderly or disabled. That's part of why your help is so important: you can help them navigate a byzantine and often unfriendly system.

Tips:

- Make sure you explain your role and the legal proceedings carefully and clearly.
- Be prepared to explain the concepts in a simple and clear fashion, perhaps several times. Try to assess your client's ability to understand the proceedings.
- Call the client early in the engagement to build trust and make sure that the client understands that you will
- When setting up appointments, ask the client about his or her work or school schedule and try to accommodate it if possible. A client may not initially feel comfortable telling you that it is difficult to get a day off work or get child care.
- If your client's primary language is not English, an interpreter is required and should be made available for every communication. CLS will give you access to our call-in interpreter service if this applies to your case

2. Client Responsiveness

Low-income clients frequently have phones that require prior purchase of minutes. Without sufficient funds, clients may borrow phones or computers to contact you. That may mean that it takes some time to get back to you, or that communication comes from different numbers or sources, or that a client doesn't always get your messages. Conversely, clients may call you hoping for immediate help when an issue is an emergency.

Tips:

- Be persistent. Call the client again if they haven't called you back.
- Don't take it personally, and don't assume it means the client is not taking the case seriously.

The document was customized for use by CLS from a resource made available by the Public Interest Pro Bono Association. Click here to learn more about them and to see the original document: <http://pipba.org/resources/>.

- Give a client multiple ways to reach you —by phone, email, and letter.
- Be flexible and respond when the client asks for help.
- Similarly, try to obtain multiple ways to reach the client when you first meet and find out which methods the client prefers.

- Ask the client to try to let you know if your usual way of contacting them will be temporarily unavailable so that you can reach them through an alternative medium if necessary.
- Get in touch with Jen at CLS if you are having problems. The faster we know about the problem, the faster we can help.

3. Other Crises

The matter you have taken on for the client may be just one of several critical things going on in his or her life: their housing or public benefits may be in jeopardy, they may be dealing with creditors, or even be facing threats and violence.

Tips:

- Be patient and understand that clients may suddenly have other priorities that take precedence over their case.
- But don't feel that you need to solve every problem a client has. It is important and helpful to set consistent boundaries, and to reinforce them. If a client has a problem that is beyond the scope of your engagement, please contact Jen to discuss it.

4. Empathy and respect

Keep in mind that it can be intimidating or embarrassing for clients to try to get help. They may feel intimidated by you as an attorney. They might be reticent to tell you about abuse or other challenging problems that they may face. They may also feel suspicion or mistrust based on prior bad experiences.

Tips:

- Convey respect, just as you would with any client,
- Answer emails, phone messages, and other outreach in the same timely manner as you normally would.
- Make clear that you work for the client.
- Listen carefully to the client and encourage questions.
- Think through small costs that might feel very large to someone without money: paying a notary, paying a hospital for copies of medical records, etc. Ask your firm if it will absorb these minor costs. It can make a huge difference. You may want to consult with your pro bono counsel about your firm's policies on these costs.
- Respect, empathy, responsiveness, and kindness will strengthen the bond with your client

5. Disabilities

Some clients are people with physical, developmental, or emotional disabilities. Sometimes those disabilities are undiagnosed. Some of these clients may present in a chaotic manner or have trouble processing information.

Tips:

- If you know about a disability, ask the client about the accommodations that they prefer. It is better to be direct than to make assumptions.
- If your client has difficulty processing information, take particular care to communicate clearly, give the client time to ask follow up questions, and repeat information as needed.
- Remember: clients with emotional and developmental disabilities are intelligent and deserve respect; make sure to treat them that way, even as you make any necessary accommodation.