

NY STATE COURT SYSTEM JOINS WITH NEW YORK STATE BAR ASSOCIATION TO LAUNCH PRO BONO NETWORK TO RESPOND TO PANDEMIC

The New York State Court System is partnering with the New York State Bar Association (NYSBA) to build and coordinate a statewide pro bono network of lawyers to handle an expected surge in legal matters resulting from the coronavirus pandemic and ensuing economic fallout.

As a first step, the courts and NYSBA will convene meetings of New York's local and affinity bar associations, large law firms, the deans of New York's 15 law schools, the heads of law school clinics, institutional providers of legal services, and others for the purpose of assembling a statewide network of pro bono lawyers that can be rapidly dispatched to help those in need of legal assistance and unable to afford a lawyer.

"At this unprecedented moment in our state and nation's history, we all need to do what we can to support one another and ensure that we will not only meet this challenge but emerge from it stronger and more united than ever before," said Chief Judge Janet DiFiore. "I know that members of New York's talented and big-hearted legal community are up to the task, and I applaud NYSBA for joining with us in this effort."

"We have rapidly transformed our court system to keep judges, court personnel, lawyers and litigants out of harm's way," Chief Judge DiFiore added. "But we must be forward-looking now, because the virus will present new challenges when we return to our courthouses and adjudicate all the pending cases that have been postponed and new cases that will arise. I am acutely aware that lawyers are sacrificing so much to put the needs of society first at a time of immense uncertainty in their personal lives."

"With New York City as the epicenter of the pandemic and the economy at a standstill, we are facing unprecedented legal challenges that will transform the profession and society as we know it," said Henry M. Greenberg, president of NYSBA. "Lawyers have always led in times of crisis and our state and profession needs NYSBA's leadership now more than ever before."

Former Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, who is of counsel at Latham & Watkins, has agreed to spearhead the effort. "I thank Chief Judge DiFiore, Hank Greenberg and NYSBA for their leadership on this issue," Lippman said. "I know that I can count on big law firms, senior and retired judges, law school leaders and those new to the profession to volunteer to be part of our corps of pro bono lawyers. Pulling together, we will all get through this."

The pro bono network is being formed in the spirit of the call issued by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who asked retired health care professionals to volunteer to be a reserve corps for the doctors, nurses and others serving on the front lines of the COVID-19

battle. Some 62,000 people have heeded that call, along with 11,000 mental health professionals, who have volunteered to provide free counseling to New Yorkers at a time when so many are suffering.

New York's existing network of pro bono and public defense attorneys were already strained prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The state court system and NYSBA are taking this action to make sure that all New Yorkers are able to exercise their right to legal counsel at a time when the need for legal services will likely be higher than ever before.

"Experts are already predicting a surge in a wide variety of cases as a result of the coronavirus crisis and aggressive steps taken to combat it," Chief Judge DiFiore said. "Though the state's legal community is being hit hard by the economic fallout of this virus, there is no doubt in my mind that many attorneys will heed our call for volunteers. We are New Yorkers, and we take care of one another in tough times."

"Our pro bono network will serve as a model for the rest of the country, which will also face a surge in the need for legal representation as the virus spreads as it inevitably will," Greenberg said. "I am proud of the leadership our association is showing at this difficult time and thankful for the partnership with the court system."

Scott Karson, president-elect of NYSBA, said he is looking forward to working with all the county and affinity bar associations in the state to create the network. "There is no higher form of public service than making sure that all clients who need lawyers at this trying time have the representation they deserve."

NYSBA is also committed to continuing to provide resources and guidance to members of the legal community who are suffering as a result of the coronavirus – be it physically or financially – especially solo practitioners and small firms across the state. The association stands ready to be of assistance in whatever way it can and will maintain a steady stream of information about the latest developments as they occur.

About the New York State Bar Association

The New York State Bar Association is the largest voluntary state bar association in the nation. Since 1876, the Association has helped shape the development of law, educated and informed the legal profession and the public, and championed the rights of New Yorkers through advocacy and guidance in our communities.