

A photograph of a desk with a laptop, a cup of coffee, and a donut on a black plate. The donut is pink with colorful sprinkles and has a bite taken out of it. The laptop is open and the coffee is in a white cup. The background is a light-colored desk.

‘DOING SOME GOOD TODAY’: PRO BONO GOES VIRTUAL

By Valentine A. Brown

As we emerge, eyes blinking, into the sunlight of the nascent post-pandemic world, we are all thinking about the new habits, tools and practices we want to keep and those we want to shed. Remote work: a keeper; masks: not so much—and then there is Zoom. Zoom calls, Zoom happy hours, Zoom birthday parties, Zoom board meetings, Zoom cooking classes. I even attended a Zoom magic show—now that was really amazing. But then there were Zoom pro bono clinics.

For the uninitiated, a pro bono clinic is when a group of legal

volunteers meets a group of clients in the same space at the same time to provide the same type of pro bono service. Common topics for clinics are simple wills and health directives, naturalization applications, expungement petitions, and even pardons.

In real life, these clinics can be a bit chaotic and life affirming at the same time. Volunteer lawyers and clients chat while waiting for their assigned seats, and then get to know each other while working together to prepare the client’s paperwork. They drink coffee together and eat donuts while waiting for signature pages to print and learn more about each other’s lives and families. In the

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meantime, clinic organizers run around (almost literally) making sure everyone is in the right spot, filling out the right paperwork, all while trying to keep the printer running.

It took only a few months after the start of the pandemic for us to hold our first virtual pro bono clinic, but since March 2020 we have held 10 Zoom clinics with several more scheduled this summer. With each clinic, we learned more Zoom skills and honed our approach to volunteer training and virtual paperwork exchanges. And while we will definitely will go back to holding some in-person clinics, there are so many positive benefits to a virtual Zoom clinic that, at least for us at Duane Morris, the virtual clinic is here to stay.

In a standard virtual clinic, volunteer attorneys are provided with training and client materials days before the clinic. At the clinic, the first hour consists of attorneys meeting on Zoom or another application for training. The trainer can share her screen and take them through a slide deck with logistics and substantive information. Clients are kept in the virtual waiting room until the training is complete, and then lawyers are paired up with clients and sent to individual breakout rooms. Sorting everyone out into their correct breakout room is the most stressful point of the clinic. Once that is done, supervising attorneys pop in and out of the breakout rooms to answer questions, check documents, and support volunteers. Upon completion, documents are emailed back and forth, with the clinic organizers being ultimately responsible to follow up with clients for remaining items and signatures.

For organizers and attorneys, patience and flexibility are key. The technology divide is real. Working with clients with limited tech knowledge and/or access can be frustrating and slows down the process. Technology and document application snafus can and do happen. PDFs don't fill, don't save, and get corrupted. Zoom connections are dropped and unable to reconnect. Clients (and sometimes attorneys) don't quite understand how Zoom works, so you may be looking at their ceiling fan rather than their face. Having extra non attorney volunteers, especially at the start of a clinic, who can assist clients with their technology challenges is a must.

Virtual clinics also require more robust pre-clinic client intake

and document gathering than live clinics. Ensuring that volunteer attorneys have as much client information as possible prior to the clinic will make the event much smoother and reduce document exchange technology hiccups on the day of. Likewise, virtual clinics require more post-clinic follow-up on the part of organizers than a live clinic. Signed representation letters, signature pages for applications, and missing client documents will all need to be gathered electronically post clinic. This often requires multiple follow-ups and some perseverance.

Despite these extra considerations though, the benefits of virtual clinics are many. Attorneys can be located anywhere, so for a firm like ours with 27 offices in the United States, participation in virtual clinics is a great way to stay connected to attorneys in other offices and allows for attorney teams not possible in a live clinic. We often join forces with our clients' in-house counsel team members for virtual clinics, pairing in-house attorneys with firm attorneys to assist clients during a clinic. The virtual environment has made these corporate team projects much easier to plan, schedule, and manage. The intense pre-clinic preparation has also improved the timing and number of our case completion rate.

Clients, too, can be located anywhere. This is especially true in clinics for federal benefits such as naturalization. Clients can participate from home, saving them precious time and money on things like transportation and childcare. We have even had clients call in to clinics while at work. Connecting with clients in their homes also alleviates the problem of necessary paperwork being left at home, which often happens in a live clinic. Meeting clients' kids and pets and other family members is always an extra bonus for volunteers.

Yet despite all these benefits, there is still no substitute for sitting down on a Saturday morning (paper coffee cups steaming, mouths full of donut) across the table from live clients, who are eager to improve their situation and share their life stories, knowing you are going to do some good that day.

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