

Debevoise  
& Plimpton

# Pro Bono Legal Service





## Weeksville Heritage Center

Debevoise advised the Weeksville Heritage Center, an education and cultural center in Brooklyn, in its admission to the New York City Cultural Institutions Group, an elite group of cultural organizations that receive funding from the City. Weeksville was the first organization in a generation added to the Group and the first Black organization to be admitted. WHC preserves the history of one of the largest free Black communities in pre-Civil War America. Debevoise continues to advise WHC on a range of legal matters.

Photo credit:  
Dominique Sindayiganza



Photo credit:  
Nic Lehoux

# Debevoise's Commitment to Pro Bono Legal Service

Debevoise has had an unwavering commitment to our pro bono clients since our firm was founded in 1931. Across all practice groups, we provide pro bono legal services to help close the justice gap and create a more equitable society.

Our pro bono work has three main goals: to provide legal representation to people who could not otherwise afford it, to strengthen the communities in which we live and work, and to protect civil liberties and public rights in the United States and around the world.

Our lawyers, summer associates and other professionals in the United States provided over 70,000 hours of free legal services in 2021. By providing direct representations and partnering with human rights, legal reform and other organizations, Debevoise helps individuals, underserved communities, nonprofit organizations and small businesses.

Says Michael W. Blair, Debevoise's Presiding Partner, "A strong commitment to pro bono work is a long-standing tradition at Debevoise and is deeply rooted in our firm culture. Our lawyers and staff pride themselves on providing the highest-quality legal services to all of our clients, commercial and pro bono alike. Pro bono work at Debevoise not only satisfies our ethical obligation to help those in need, but is part of what makes our lawyers strong leaders in our practices and in our communities."

Others have taken note of our deep and long-standing commitment; we are consistently ranked among the top law firms in *The American Lawyer's* annual pro bono survey. We also score well in *The American Lawyer's* "A-List," which is based in part on commitment to pro bono legal service.

Debevoise is a charter signatory to the Pro Bono Institute's Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge™, and has agreed to commit at least 5% of our annual billed time to pro bono matters. We are also a signatory to the New York City Bar Statement of Pro

Bono Principles and a member of the UK Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono.

We work on hundreds of pro bono matters each year that range from landmark international and national disputes to representing low-income individuals in the communities in which we live and practice.

Debevoise lawyers obtain pro bono work from a variety of sources. Frequently, pro bono matters are referred to us by legal service organizations with which the firm has long-standing relationships, including The Legal Aid Society, Sanctuary for Families, Human Rights First, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Immigration Equality and Start Small Think Big. Other pro bono projects come from our lawyers, who are inspired by a cause. Our lawyers make their matters count by making them their own, and our clients notice the difference.

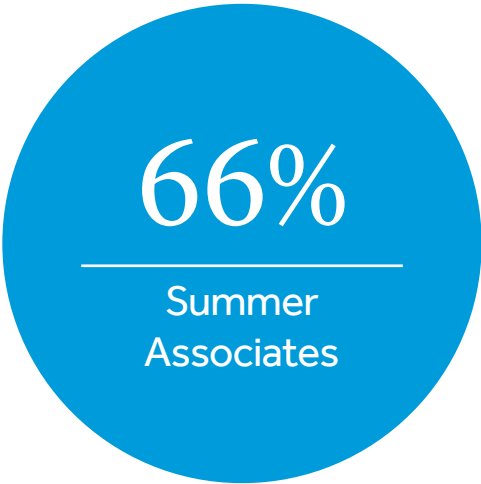
Our lawyers participate in pro bono activities throughout their careers, and we fully support our lawyers' pro bono work, regardless of whether it is within or outside of their particular practice areas. Our pro bono matters are handled like all other matters, with the dedication of all available firm resources needed for the representations.

We view pro bono work as an important element of our lawyers' professional development and work with lawyers to select pro bono matters that will help them develop legal skills and substantive knowledge.

We staff summer associates on ongoing pro bono projects and provide special opportunities for summer associates to take primary responsibility for certain matters.



In 2021, Debevoise attorneys in the United States performed over 71,000 hours of pro bono work, averaging 103 hours per attorney.



In 2021, 66% of Debevoise summer associates worked on pro bono matters.



In 2021, 67% of associates and 58% of all attorneys in the firm's U.S. offices performed at least 20 hours of pro bono work.



In 2021, Debevoise attorneys worked on more than 850 pro bono matters.

## Corporate Pro Bono

Our corporate lawyers provide a wide range of pro bono legal services. We assist not-for-profit organizations in entity formation, corporate governance, business operations and employee benefits matters. We also advise organizations on mergers and other strategic transactions, on real estate matters and, when necessary, on how to wind down their operations and file for bankruptcy. Our practice includes organizations based in the United States and nongovernmental organizations operating internationally.

Corporate lawyers advise low-income entrepreneurs on selecting the right corporate form for their businesses, assist in drafting governance documents and contracts, and review leases and negotiate with landlords.

When appropriate, we provide pro bono services to impact investment vehicles, benefit corporations and social enterprises, including organizations seeking to provide banking and financial services to underserved communities.

## Litigation Pro Bono

Debevoise litigators engage in a full range of pro bono activity, from representations of individuals who cannot afford legal counsel to high-impact litigation that is challenging systemic racism and changing the law and the status of low-income or marginalized communities across the country and around the globe.

We represent clients, file amici briefs, conduct research and issue reports. We work extensively in the areas of criminal justice reform, civil rights, international human rights, the death penalty, criminal defense, immigration, and employment and wage and hour violations.

## Tax Pro Bono

Lawyers in the Tax Department provide advice on a range of issues to not-for-profit organizations and to low-income entrepreneurs. We also represent low-income litigants in Tax Court.



“As a summer associate, I had the opportunity to work on several pro bono matters. I helped research and draft an appellate brief challenging the Department of Homeland Security’s plan to build a border wall through a butterfly sanctuary and did research on how to use the Alien Tort Statute to hold human rights violators abroad accountable in U.S. court. I also drafted a motion for compassionate release as part of the Holloway Project and helped immigrants with their asylum and temporary protected status applications. Pro bono work gave me a chance to do incredibly substantive work as a summer while advancing issues that are important to me.”

**Alexa Busser Lopez**  
Litigation Associate

## Cross-Department Pro Bono

Some of our most successful pro bono efforts are not tied to a particular department and give lawyers the opportunity to work with colleagues from other practice areas. Lawyers from all departments work together on affirmative immigration matters, including DACA, asylum, legal permanent resident and naturalization applications; uncontested divorces; and name change petitions.

## Broad Partnerships

The firm has ongoing relationships with a wide variety of legal services organizations, including those listed below.

- Advocates for Children  
Bail for Immigration Detainees  
Bronx Defenders  
Campaign Legal Center  
Center for Constitutional Rights  
Center for Justice and Accountability  
Center for Reproductive Rights  
Centre for Criminal Appeals  
City Bar Justice Center  
Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice  
Eyewitness to Atrocities  
Hackney Law Centre  
Her Justice  
Human Dignity Trust  
Human Rights First  
Immigration Equality  
Lambda Legal
- Lawyers Alliance for New York  
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law  
Legal Services NYC  
National Center for Lesbian Rights  
National Pro Bono Centre  
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest  
Office of the Appellate Defender  
PILnet  
Sanctuary for Families  
Start Small Think Big  
The Legal Aid Society  
UnLtd  
Urban Justice Center  
Veteran Advocacy Project  
Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts  
Volunteers of Legal Services





# Pro Bono Awards and Recognition

## 2021 Beacon of Justice Award

The National Legal Aid & Defender Association gave Debevoise a 2021 Beacon of Justice Award for The Holloway Project, the firm's initiative to fight for criminal justice reform and against racial inequality. The Holloway Project has been profiled in *The Wall Street Journal*. For the past six years, Debevoise lawyers have worked to reduce excessive prison sentences that were required by harsh federal sentencing guidelines which Congress has since corrected. This effort, led by former federal prosecutor and former U.S. District Judge John Gleeson, has already resulted in reduced sentences for more than 30 clients, erased more than 1100 years of their prison sentences and won the release of 26 of those clients.

## Debevoise Named a 2021 Social Impact Leader by Law360

Debevoise was named a Social Impact Leader by *Law360* in its inaugural Social Impact ranking. According to *Law360*, firms were ranked using four key indicators of socially responsible business practices including racial and ethnic diversity, gender equality, employee engagement and pro bono service.

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In 2021, we were also recognized by the following partner organizations and clients for our commitment to providing access to justice and the breadth of our pro bono practice:

- The Office of the Appellate Defender in New York honored Debevoise with its Gideon Award for our exemplary commitment to the rights of indigent convicted defendants.
- Associate Marisa Taney won the Rising Star Thurgood Marshall Award for Exceptional Commitment to Pro Bono Services as a lawyer who has demonstrated an exemplary commitment to pro bono legal service and who has provided or facilitated the provision of pro bono service in federal courts or agencies within the Second Circuit.
- Debevoise pro bono counsel Jennifer R. Cowan was awarded the 2021 Public Interest Law Leadership Award by The Legal Aid Society for her outstanding achievements overseeing the firm's renowned pro bono program, through which Debevoise lawyers annually contribute 4,000 hours of free legal assistance to clients of The Legal Aid Society.

To learn more about our firm and what we're passionate about, follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).

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## Our Offices

### New York

919 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10022  
Tel: +1 212 909 6000  
Fax: +1 212 909 6836

### Frankfurt

Taunustor 1 (TaunusTurm)  
60310 Frankfurt am Main  
Tel: +49 69 2097 5000  
Fax: +49 69 2097 5555

### Washington, D.C.

801 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20004  
Tel: +1 202 383 8000  
Fax: +1 202 383 8118

### Luxembourg

4a, rue Albert Borschette  
L-1246 Luxembourg  
Tel: +352 28 5795 33 00

### San Francisco

650 California Street  
San Francisco, CA 94108  
Tel: +1 415 738 5700  
Fax: +1 415 644 5628

### Hong Kong

21/F AIA Central  
1 Connaught Road Central  
Hong Kong  
Tel: +852 2160 9800  
Fax: +852 2810 9828

### London

65 Gresham Street  
London  
EC2V 7NQ  
Tel: +44 20 7786 9000  
Fax: +44 20 7588 4180

### Shanghai

13/F, Tower 1  
Jing'an Kerry Centre  
1515 Nanjing Road West  
Shanghai 200040  
Tel: +86 21 5047 1800  
Fax: +86 21 5047 1600

### Paris

103 rue de Grenelle  
75007 Paris  
Tel: +33 1 40 73 12 12  
Fax : +33 1 47 20 50 82