

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

NONPROFIT SUPPORT

Pro Bono Services Ramping Up for Nonprofits Facing Funding Cuts and Legal Threats

Eighty percent of nonprofits say they will be interested in pro bono assistance within the next six to 12 months. Expert volunteers appear to be ready to meet the demand.

By *Stephanie Beasley*

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LegalCORPS, in a partnership with the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, provides a help desk that offers free real-time support, a legal resource library, step-by-step guidance to complete a nonprofit compliance assessment, and compliance clinics with lawyers.

Is the nonprofit sector reaching peak pro bono? As nonprofits face funding cuts, [layoffs](#), and potential legal challenges, many are seeking help from volunteers with legal, public relations, and human resources expertise.

Pro-Bono Tips From Taproot

More nonprofits are seeking pro bono helpers to sustain their operations as they grapple with federal funding cuts and increased demand for their services.

Taproot Foundation CEO Cat Ward has the following tips for organizations that want to develop an effective volunteer network.

- To ensure pro bono consultants make the most of their time and expertise, match them with appropriate groups. Taproot relies on its platform, [Taproot Plus](#), to identify the best volunteers for each nonprofit.
- Make sure volunteers and nonprofits are clear on where help is most needed because sometimes nonprofits seek help for an issue that is symptomatic of a larger problem. For instance, fundraising assistance is often a top need; however, funding shortfalls could be indicative of other flaws in the business model.
- Prepare for greater demand for pro bono consultants and volunteers as [massive cuts](#) to Medicaid and food-assistance programs take effect in the coming years, placing more financial pressure on nonprofits. Yet note that people with expertise will likely be looking for ways to support their local nonprofits.

A [recent survey](#) of 175 nonprofit leaders and staff found that 74 percent saw increased demand for their programs while 60 percent have had their funding reduced since January. This is according to the Taproot Foundation, which connects nonprofits to volunteers from more than 40 companies with expertise in accounting and finance, business planning, information technology, and other areas. Given the challenges, 81 percent of Taproot survey respondents said their organization would be interested in receiving pro bono assistance within the next six to 12 months.

Finding enough voluntary help to meet the demand is challenging, given that many nonprofits are facing decreased funding for their operations and increased demand for their services as the federal government slashes Medicaid, food assistance, and equity programs that benefit impoverished and marginalized communities. The good news is that many corporations and law firms are aware of executive actions affecting nonprofits and have indicated their willingness to help, said Cat Ward, Taproot's CEO.

“What I’m hearing from folks is that this is a place where companies feel they can really lean in and invest and where there is a lot of interest among their talent,” she said.

Taproot wants to connect nonprofits to these corporate volunteers. And it believes the implementation of AI tools is “changing the game” for what nonprofits can do with fewer resources, Ward said.

Yet only 50 percent of participants in the Taproot survey said they are using AI tools. In a recent [tech survey](#), the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* similarly found that only 46 percent were using the tools.

Taproot is in discussions with Adobe, Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, and other companies about developing more volunteers who could help nonprofits identify how they might use AI to create efficiencies in the coming years, Ward said.

Challenges Ahead

Pro bono legal support is already seeing a boom as more firms and legal aid groups are offering help to nonprofits navigating executive orders, federal investigations, and lawsuits.

One of them is LegalCORPS, a legal aid nonprofit in Minnesota with approximately 500 volunteers. This month, LegalCORPS launched a partnership with the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits to provide free legal aid to nonprofits, CEO Nicole Deters said. The two groups are providing a help desk that will offer real-time support, a legal resource library, step-by-step guidance to complete a nonprofit compliance assessment, and compliance clinics with lawyers. Smaller nonprofits with cash budgets under \$1.5 million will be eligible to receive individual legal needs assessments as well as an individual compliance audit with a lawyer.

Minnesota saw a spike in the creation of groups focused on racial equity following the police murder of George Floyd. Now those groups are worried they might be caught in the cross hairs of the Trump administration’s efforts to rollback diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts championed by the Biden administration, Deters noted.

Within the state, scrutiny of nonprofit groups has increased in the wake of a [pandemic fraud](#) case involving a Minnesota anti-hunger nonprofit, Deters said. The Minnesota House of Representatives has since [created a fraud prevention](#) and state agency oversight committee to examine government funding to nonprofits. LegalCORPS wants to help groups comply with state and federal laws and is tapping its network of partner organizations to do that, Deters said. Those partners include law firms Ballard Spahr, DLA Piper, and Faegre Drinker as well as organizations like the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota and the Minnesota Black Collective Foundation.

Nationwide, organizations advocating for immigration, racial justice, and other polarizing causes are preparing for a potential spike in probes and reviews by state and federal officials, said Karl Mill, founder of the Los Angeles-based Mill Law Center for nonprofits. Last month, Mill launched the Defending Equity Initiative, which provides pro bono legal and strategic assistance to organizations “targeted for their support of diversity, equity, and inclusion, immigrant rights, and other progressive values,” according to its [website](#). That support includes assistance with IRS or state audits, lawsuits from private actors, challenges to DEI programs, opposition from congressional committees or public officials, immigration enforcement actions, or harassment and threats to staff.



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The Defending Equity Initiative is still in its early days of gathering volunteers, but it has heard from about 15 people interested in volunteering their legal and public relations expertise, Mill said. So far, most attorneys who have contacted the group specialize in transactional law, which focuses on facilitating agreements and ensuring entities comply with the law. It’s different from litigation, the practice of contesting or resolving disputes through the legal system, which groups like the National Council of Nonprofits and Democracy

Forward [have deployed](#) in recent months to stall Trump administration policy changes impacting nonprofits. Mill specializes in trust, estate, and tax law.

“We transactional attorneys aren’t usually on the front lines,” Mill said. “But we all want to do something. I think there are people who want to push back.”

Mill Law Center has lawyers licensed to practice in California, Kentucky, New York, and Ohio. Mill said since launching the Defending Equity Initiative he’s also heard from attorneys in Indiana and Texas. Growth in red states might be particularly important given the likelihood that attorney general offices in those states might try to intimidate nonprofits to “score points” with the Trump administration, Mill said.

Said Mill: “Volunteers in those states who feel comfortable dealing with the attorney general on charitable matters will be really helpful.”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

DATA & RESEARCH

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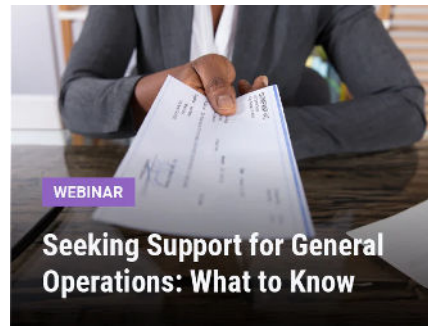
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