

OUR FIRM

Pro Bono

At Baker Donelson, pro bono service is an integral part of our law practice and our culture. We believe in giving back to our communities, our profession and our system of justice, and we can best do that by contributing our legal skills to individuals and non-profit organizations who need our help. Our commitment to pro bono is strong, and keeps growing stronger every year.

Highlighted below are just a few examples of our pro bono projects.

ABA Free Legal Answers

Buck Lewis's vision to provide a virtual pro bono legal clinic for low-income individuals became a reality thanks to collaborative efforts between Baker Donelson, the Tennessee Bar Association, the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services, and the Tennessee Access to Justice Commission. Online Tennessee Justice, launched in 2009, soon expanded to many other states. It has now become a nationwide program adopted by the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service, and is known as [ABA Free Legal Answers](#). The program allows for qualified low-income individuals to ask legal questions, through a secure online portal, to be answered by a volunteer attorney. ABA Free Legal Answers is now operating in more than 41 jurisdictions. The platform now accepts questions on federal immigration and veterans' issues. Since its inception, Free Legal Answers has received more than 250,000 questions from program participants seeking pro bono legal advice from skilled attorneys like those at Baker Donelson.

Intellectual Property

Baker Donelson attorneys are committed to providing IP pro bono services to community members and organizations in need, including artists, inventors, entrepreneurs, and non-profit organizations. We work to help protect and enforce our pro bono clients' patent, trademark, copyright, and trade secrets. Most recently, we have provided strategic trademark counseling pro bono services to the United Way as it considers brand protection and registrability. Our attorneys serve on the Advisory Board of Georgia Lawyers for the Arts, and are regularly recognized for their pro bono service by the Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta and the Pro Bono Project of the State Bar of Georgia.

Homelessness

Attorneys at Baker Donelson continuously work to serve those experiencing homelessness by providing them with access to legal representation. Many Baker Donelson offices actively volunteer with the Homeless Experience Legal Protection (HELP) program of legal clinics for the homeless, including Birmingham, Knoxville, Memphis, Nashville and New Orleans. Baker Donelson attorneys founded the Birmingham, Memphis, and Nashville HELP chapters, and they continue to manage the running of the Memphis and Nashville clinics. HELP is a nationwide network providing vital assistance to address legal obstacles preventing clients from securing housing, finding a job, or obtaining desperately needed public benefits. Our attorneys are also actively involved with homeless court programs in Birmingham and New Orleans. The collaborative efforts of judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys and homeless service providers are used to resolve legal issues that prevent homeless clients from escaping the cycle of poverty. If a client is unable to pay fines, these programs work with the client to exchange the fines for community service or other productive activities such as obtaining a driver's license or GED.

Baker Donelson provided pro bono support that was integral to the recently published 2020 State Index on Youth Homelessness, a report from the National Homelessness Law Center and True Colors United that

evaluates all 50 states and the District of Columbia on their efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. The Index accounts for approximately 60 different factors illustrative of how individual states protect, or fail to protect, youth from ending up as part of the 4.2 million homeless youth in the United States. Baker Donelson's involvement included the work of 15 attorneys, three summer associates and four pro bono fellows, who spent a cumulative total of nearly 500 hours researching how each state fell within the criteria set for review by the Law Center. Powered by the Index, states can clearly evaluate their efforts on youth homelessness and allocate resources accordingly.

Court Debt

Baker Donelson, working with non-profits The National Center for Law and Economic Justice, Civil Rights Corps, and Just City, filed two federal class-action lawsuits in the Middle District of Tennessee challenging Tennessee statutes that require revocation of driver's licenses for individuals who fail to pay certain litigation taxes, court costs and fines. Hundreds of thousands of driver's licenses have been revoked under these statutes, often without any notice to the individual. The vast majority have not been able to regain a license, creating devastating consequences for many of these impoverished Tennessee residents. People affected by these statutes were deprived of a key tool for finding and keeping a job, leading to further inability to pay their debt and trapping the poorest in a cycle of debt, poverty and alienation from their communities. In 2018, plaintiffs won summary judgment in both cases, ending these unconstitutional practices and making thousands of low-income drivers eligible for license reinstatement. The outcome of these cases will have repercussions throughout the country, as many other states have similar laws or practices, and some are already being challenged in litigation.

Immigration

Baker Donelson attorneys are active in pro bono immigration cases. Most recently, our attorneys contributed to the pro bono representation of a group of 92 men and women who were on a failed deportation flight to Somalia, known as the "Somali 92." This class action resulted from a December 2017 incident in which U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement attempted to deport 92 individuals to Somalia. Over a period of 48 hours, the plane was held up in Dakar, Senegal, where it sat on a runway for 23 hours and ultimately returned to the U.S. During those two days, the men and women on the flight were forced to remain shackled, were unable to stand or use the restroom, and were subjected to physical and verbal abuse by guards. Upon return to the U.S., Baker Donelson's attorneys and legal staff were involved in the representation of a young man, who was born in Somalia but was raised in the U.S., ensuring access to medical care and the opportunity to reopen his immigration case.

Bail Practices

Civil Rights Corps, the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection (ICAP) at Georgetown Law and Baker Donelson filed a lawsuit against Hamblen County officials for their roles in a cash bail system that led to the systematic jailing of presumptively innocent people solely because they are poor. The experiences of the four named plaintiffs shed light on how Hamblen County's failure to provide fair bail hearings leaves poor residents powerless in court and condemns them to suffer the hellish conditions of the Hamblen County Jail, referred to by Sheriff Esco Jarnagin himself in *The New York Times*, as a "cesspool of a dungeon" because of its dangerous overcrowding and lack of sanitation and medical care. The lawsuit exposed the defendants' practice of failing to consider people's ability to afford money bail or alternatives to money bail, leading to pretrial detention without constitutional safeguards as the default rule in Hamblen County. As a result of the ruling, Sheriff Jarnagin must stop jailing people who are arrested and assigned money bail without considering their ability to pay, without individualized hearings, and without access to a lawyer. Although the ruling marks a victory for the citizens of Hamblen County, these unfair bail practices are typical of many courts in Tennessee and across the country.

Veterans

Baker Donelson attorneys in a number of our offices have supported initiatives to assist our veteran population with various legal issues, including assisting with VA disability claims, principally through the [ABA Veterans Legal Services Initiative](#) – a program planned, designed, and announced under the tenure of Linda Klein, a past president of the ABA, and a litigator in our Atlanta office.

Pro Bono Awards

Recent awards honoring the pro bono service of Baker Donelson attorneys:

National Homelessness Law Center's 2023 Human Right to Housing Awards

ABA Section of Litigation's 2023 John Minor Wisdom Public Service and Professionalism Award