



PRO BONO PUBLICO WINTER 2022

Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County
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LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF SAN MATEO COUNTY

Each year in October, I get to take a moment to look back on the past year and the wonderful clients and pro bonos I have worked with. Each year I am filled with gratitude for all the work our volunteers have done, and gratitude that I get to be a small part of it.

2022 has been a year of rebuilding and figuring out what our new normal will be. We are seeing that the pandemic continues to disproportionately affect our clients. Our neighbors are facing eviction, domestic violence incidents continue to be more severe, and many children and dependent adults have lost their caregivers to COVID. At the same time, we are seeing a time of reopening and renewal. Attorneys are back in their offices and are more available to do pro bono work, we are now able to have events in person again, and the court has established new protocols that make it easier for people to access the justice system. Despite the adversities facing the underserved communities of San Mateo County, our pro bonos have shown that the legal community is willing to step up and help.

Over the course of the past year, our pro bonos have helped 114 clients obtain safety and stability. The following stories represent only three of the 114 clients our pro bonos have assisted this past year but show how meaningful pro bono work is. My deepest thanks go out to all of you for your dedication to the underserved communities of San Mateo County.



Sincerely,

Stephanie Bilinski
Pro Bono Director
Legal Aid SMC

Helping Grandma

Morrison & Foerster patent partner Anita Choi, lead scientific specialist Evangelina Lopez and corporate associate Emily Voytas have provided long-term assistance to an “incredibly kindhearted, loving grandma”. The grandmother originally came to Legal Aid for assistance in obtaining guardianship for her newborn grandson. The client’s daughter and the client agreed that it would be in the best interest of the baby to be taken care of by the client. In 2018, the team from MoFo secured guardianship. The client then asked if they would be able to help her adopt her grandson. Despite being new to the area of adoption, the team jumped in and agreed to work with the client to make sure that she would be able to care for her grandson throughout his childhood.



After many bumps in the road (and an inconvenient pandemic that delayed matters), the adoption was finalized. This was such a happy day for the client and her family. *We thank Anita, Evangelina and Emily for their hard work and dedication to this special family.*

Keeping Siblings Together

Pro bono attorney Deborah Heller has been a dedicated volunteer since she joined Legal Aid SMC’s pro bono panel in 2020. She has not shied away from taking on difficult cases. In 2020 she began working on a guardianship case for a very special family and has since provided many hours of hard work to ensure that this extended and tight-knit family remains together.

Jane and John Doe contacted Legal Aid for help in obtaining guardianship for their cousin’s children. John’s first cousin and his wife were the parents of seven children before they both tragically passed away. The family joined together to determine the best way for them to care for the children. Given that the family members who were able to care for the children also had children of their own, they made the decision to divide the children between two homes. Jane and John were able to take four of the children, and another uncle took the other three. The family decided that although the children could not live together, the family would ensure that the children spent as much time with each other as possible and they would work hard to maintain the relationships between the children. Deborah Heller worked with Jane and John on obtaining legal guardianship of the four children in their care and in 2021 they were formally made part of Jane and John’s home.



Deborah Heller

Tragedy struck the family again late in the year when the uncle who had guardianship of the other three children also passed away. Although Jane and John were busy caring for the four children in their guardianship, along with their four biological children, they didn’t hesitate to welcome the three others into their home. Deborah again jumped into action and worked with the family on obtaining guardianship for the three other children. Since the kids had been living in another county with their uncle, the case was a bit more complicated than our usual guardianships. Deborah filed a request for a temporary guardianship in the other county, which was granted. The guardianship was finalized in the summer of 2022.

The family was extremely grateful and sent Deborah the following note: “Deborah, You have been an Angel sent by God. No matter what is happening we feel blessed and confident you will help us through. Thank you for all you do for our family. You are Loved and Appreciated.”

Remotely supporting families in need

IBM Corporation in-house counsel Feb Cabrasawan might have moved halfway across the country, but he has remained committed to serving San Mateo residents. Feb had previously volunteered with Legal Aid SMC and had reconnected with us at the start of the pandemic. Feb maintained his California license and found that Legal Aid SMC's limited conservatorship project would allow him to handle cases from his new home in Texas. Luckily, the San Mateo Probate Court had decided to change its policy to allow for remote hearings in limited conservatorship matters. Not only was it important for conservatees who might be medically fragile to avoid being in public during the pandemic, but remote appearances are much more convenient for caregivers who may need to transport their children with medical equipment or find someone else to care for their child while they are at court.

Feb jumped right in and immediately took on several limited conservatorship matters, including working with one lovely family. The Vance family has been connected with Legal Aid SMC for several years. Lori and John Vance are the parents of three children with special needs. They already have a conservatorship for their eldest daughter and came to us for assistance when their middle daughter was turning 18. It is clear to anyone that Lori and John are dedicated to the welfare of their daughters. Feb was able to assist the family in ensuring that they had the tools to properly care for their now-adult daughter.

Feb says, "The pandemic lockdown was an incredibly challenging time for everyone and being able to help the Vance family remotely, with the full support of the Probate Court and Legal Aid SMC staff, was an incredibly fulfilling experience, which I would gladly repeat for another client."



Feb Cabrasawan

We thank Feb for his dedication to serving Legal Aid clients!

**All names and identifying details of the clients have been changed.*

Thank you to all the attorneys and support staff that allow us to keep our Pro Bono Projects running. Although we haven't been able to highlight all the work you have done in 2022, please know that we see and appreciate each and every one of you. With your support, we are working together to build a better and more just tomorrow.

www.legalaidsmc.org/pro-bono-programs

For more than 50 years low-income residents of San Mateo County have entrusted Legal Aid SMC's Pro Bono Project to help them with their legal issues. By joining our Pro Bono panel, you will assist clients who would otherwise be without legal representation in areas affecting their basic needs.

We welcome pro bonos of all experience levels, from new attorneys looking to gain litigation experience to experts willing to take on difficult cases. You will join thousands of other attorneys that have used their education and skills to ensure justice for the underserved populations of our county. We are here to partner with you, assist you, train you, and provide you with a panel of attorneys who will mentor you as you help others. For more information, please contact Stephanie Bilinski, Pro Bono Director at sbilinski@legalaidsmc.org.

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