Time. Or rather, lack of it.

That's the answer most attorneys give when asked what stops them from doing more pro bono work. Both new associates and seasoned partners cite billable hour requirements as a significant barrier. Then there is Janet Goelz Hoffman: A one-woman force for good, Janet has always weaved volunteer legal work into her practice, committing hundreds of hours of time and expertise to provide direct legal services to nonprofits, while also encouraging and supervising younger attorneys, paralegals, and interns on pro bono matters. For her enduring commitment to pro bono, her devoted mentorship of younger lawyers, and her recent legal work on behalf of 24 affiliates of NAMI Illinois, Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and our Community Law Project is
delighted to spotlight Janet Goelz Hoffman as this quarter’s outstanding pro bono volunteer.

Born and raised in a small town in western Pennsylvania, Janet moved to Evanston Illinois after earning a scholarship to National College of Education. She transferred to Lake Forest College where she discovered a real “affinity for numbers,” and graduated with a degree in economics. After earning her JD from Northwestern, Janet put economics and law together, with her initial job as a tax attorney with Kirkland & Ellis in Chicago. But early in her legal career, Janet moved to a boutique firm and built a niche for herself in public finance law. When the small firm merged with Katten Muchin & Rosenman in 1987, Janet found her permanent professional home.

Over the past 30 years at Katten, Janet has built a successful practicing helping hundreds of local, regional and national nonprofit organizations obtain the capital necessary for their infrastructure needs and mission-driven work. Janet’s clients include such stalwarts as the Lyric Opera, the Museum of Contemporary Arts, UChicago Medical Center, and Planned Parenthood, as well as many new and emerging organizations. Even with this extensive list of clients, Janet has somehow managed to make time for pro bono work. Her motivation? To give back to the nonprofit sector that has made her legal career so rewarding.

And how she has given...
About five years ago, Katten's pro bono coordinator, Jonathan Baum, approached Janet to help with a matter referred by the Community Law Project. The National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI)-Illinois had requested legal assistance to help it meet new national guidelines on affiliate compliance. The national organization imposed a deadline, after which state and local chapters that didn't meet guidelines could face suspension or termination of their affiliate status. Janet knew of NAMI's important work supporting individuals with mental illness and their families. She agreed to take on the project.

Fast forward to 2018.

Janet and her team—which often includes associates, paralegals, and summer interns—have now helped about two dozen affiliates of NAMI-Illinois standardize bylaws and otherwise comply with national guidance, all well ahead of the timeline set by the national office.

Suzanne Spears, of NAMI Illinois, says “Janet Goelz Hoffman provided NAMI Illinois and its 23 affiliates throughout the state with exemplary pro bono legal services for several years. Without her help, and that of her associates, many affiliates would have found it extremely difficult to find the resources to pay to have their bylaws reviewed and approved.”

Mary Holleran, Executive Director of NAMI Illinois, adds, “Janet’s expertise, patience and kindness has helped make a potentially overwhelming process manageable, and most importantly, it allows NAMI affiliates to provide quality and efficient services and achieve the mission of supporting, educating and advocating for all those affected by mental health conditions.”

For her unwavering commitment to pro bono, and for passing on her passion to those she mentors, Janet Goelz Hoffman is a shining star in Chicago’s legal community.
volunteer engaged in impactful public interest work. To nominate an attorney, contact Julie Justicz at jjusticz@clccrul.org.

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