

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### LARGE LAW FIRMS REPORT RECORD NUMBER OF PRO BONO HOURS

The Australian legal profession has weathered a turbulent year and emerged from 2020 with thriving pro bono practices, according to the *Report on the 7<sup>th</sup> National Law Firm Pro Bono Survey (Survey)* released today. While areas for development remain, the impressive quantity and range of pro bono work being undertaken by large Australian firms is cause for optimism for the future of the sector.

The Survey is conducted every two years, and forms part of a longitudinal study of pro bono legal work performed by Australian firms with 50 or more lawyers. Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents to the 2020 Survey reported performing a record 457,216.4 hours of pro bono legal work, and the highest recorded average pro bono hours per lawyer.

Pleasingly, the number of dedicated pro bono partners working at large firms across Australia has continued to rise and the percentage of firms providing full billable hour credit to their lawyers for pro bono work has increased significantly. In addition, more firms than ever before are providing pro bono secondments to community legal centres and other community organisations.

Large firms have continued to focus on assisting the most vulnerable members of our society, and the crucial not-for-profit and community organisations that support them. In 2020, firms continued to provide just under half of their pro bono legal work for individuals, supporting a range of clients including people who are financially vulnerable, refugees and asylum seekers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Despite these pleasing results, the 2020 Survey indicates that there is still room for growth within the pro bono practices of large firms. In particular, the proportion of firms hiring at least one dedicated pro bono coordinator has been consistently declining since 2012. Additionally, the average pro bono participation rate at respondent firms has not meaningfully increased since 2010, and in 2020 just over half of all firms set a budget for their pro bono program – despite it being best practice to do so.

“During the 12 years we have been conducting the Survey pro bono legal practice in Australia has continued to grow and mature,” Gabriela Christian-Hare, CEO of the Australian Pro Bono Centre, commented. “The pro bono community plays a crucial role in providing access to justice to vulnerable members of our community and the organisations that support them. Many Survey respondent firms have rolled up their sleeves and overcome significant challenges in the past year to continue to run, and in many cases, expand their pro bono programs. Those with thriving practices enjoy strong partnership support and leadership, an engagement and willingness by staff across the firm to participate, and a clear dedication of time and resources to pro bono work,” she remarked.

“A majority of firms believe their pro bono program provides a range of benefits to the firm. Using a variety of evaluation methods, over 60% of respondent firms indicated that pro bono provides opportunities for additional skill development, increased pride in the firm and opportunities for lawyers to be involved in direct client work,” said Gabriela.

“In the corporate world we are seeing a shift to 'stakeholder capitalism' where companies embrace a wider purpose than mere profit, hoping to develop a better 'culture'. This Survey, as with previous Surveys, shows that law firms have long been ahead in that field. And for good reason: pro bono work is good for morale, recruitment and retention, and helps build skills and a broader outlook. The steady growth of pro bono shows that more and more law firms are recognising the benefits it brings to them as well as to society,” commented Phillip Cornwell, Chair of the Australian Pro Bono Centre.

“The Survey Report has lots of fascinating detail, and lessons to learn. For example, participation rates are not growing – I wonder whether this will change so long as only half the firms surveyed give full billable hour credit for pro bono work? Pro bono should not be a spare time, or own time, task for busy lawyers,” Phillip noted.

“I commend the Survey Report to you, and thank the law firms surveyed for taking the time to respond, and for their continuing efforts to serve the public good,” said Phillip.

You can read the 7<sup>th</sup> National Law Firm Pro Bono Survey Report [here](#).  
Highlights from the Survey Report are available [here](#).

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