

MEDIA RELEASE

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RECORD-BREAKING YEAR FOR PRO BONO

Despite ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian legal profession reported a record-breaking 641,966 hours of pro bono legal work in the 2021 financial year (**FY2021**). That's according to the 14th Annual Performance Report of the National Pro Bono Target (**Target**), released by the Australian Pro Bono Centre (**Centre**) today.

This is by far the highest number of pro bono hours ever reported by signatories to the Target. It is an increase of 16% since FY2020, and an increase of 36% from the hours reported just two years ago in FY2019.

Target signatories reported an average of 39.7 pro bono hours per lawyer in FY2021, significantly exceeding the Target of 35 hours. This is the highest average hours per lawyer reported for a decade.

A record 16,435 full-time equivalent lawyers are now covered by the Target. And as at 30 June 2021, there were 270 signatories to the Target – a significant increase from 187 signatories as at 30 June 2020. A substantial proportion of the signatories that reported in FY2021 are small law firms (93 signatories) and individual solicitors and barristers (70 signatories), demonstrating that lawyers across the spectrum of the Australian legal profession are deeply committed to pro bono legal work.

Marking a significant milestone for the advancement of pro bono legal work in Australia, the Target was opened to in-house legal teams for the first time in FY2021. In-house individuals and teams agree to use their best efforts to provide at least 20 hours of pro bono legal services per lawyer per year. Twenty-seven in-house signatories reported a total of 981 pro bono hours in their first year of commitment to the Target.

"The start to the 2020s will go down as one of the most turbulent periods in living memory, but it will also be remembered for how lawyers significantly escalated their efforts to support the most vulnerable members of our community. In Australia, the profession's focus has been on assisting those affected by the pandemic and a number of natural disasters", commented Gabriela Christian-Hare, CEO of the Australian Pro Bono Centre.

"The profession's commitment to pro bono has been growing steadily over time. However, the significant growth in hours since 2019 is setting a new benchmark for pro bono assistance in Australia. The hours performed by some of the largest law firms are at record levels this year, reflecting a desire to further push the boundaries and have tangible and lasting social impact through pro bono work. Notably, more individual solicitors and barristers have also joined the Target and are devoting their personal time to advise and represent disadvantaged individuals and community organisations. This period has served to further solidify the role of pro bono practice in a number of smaller law firms as well as in-house teams around the country, although there is considerable room for growth in both cohorts", Gabriela said.

The Centre's Chair, Phillip Cornwell, added: "One doesn't want to be 'glass half empty' in the face of strong pro bono growth in a difficult year, but it is a shame that quite a few firms, including large firms, are falling well short of the Target, and missing out on the considerable benefits that flow from undertaking pro bono work. Not the least of these benefits is fulfilling the pro bono requirements imposed by Governments and

the growing number of ESG minded corporates as a condition of membership of their legal panels. I encourage those firms to redouble their efforts, lest their clients may come to doubt whether these firms are in fact using their 'best endeavours' to achieve the Target. The Centre stands ready to help."

For the first time this year, the Centre asked Target signatories to report on hours of pro bono work undertaken by lawyers based in each Australian State and Territory. A significant majority of hours were performed by solicitors based in NSW (44%) and Victoria (32%). While this correlates somewhat with the proportion of the Australian population based in these jurisdictions – as well as the number of solicitors – it indicates that there is an opportunity for growth in a number of other Australian jurisdictions.

There is also a disparity of effort among Target signatories. Only 45% of signatories met or exceeded their respective Targets in FY2021 – a small improvement from 44% in FY2020.

Foundation Target signatories – those signatories who committed to the Target before its launch on 26 April 2007 – reported on average 54.4 pro bono hours per lawyer, significantly higher than the overall average of 39.7. Mature signatories – those who committed to the Target before 1 July 2014 – also reported an above-average result of 41.5 pro bono hours per lawyer.

The full report can be accessed [here](#).

Background to the Target

The National Pro Bono Target is a voluntary target that can be adopted by:

- law firms and incorporated legal practices (ILPs)
- solicitors
- barristers
- in-house legal teams
- individual in-house lawyers.

Signatories commit to the Target by signing a [Statement of Principles](#).

Law firm, ILP, solicitor and barrister signatories to the Target agree to use their best efforts to provide at least **35 hours** of “pro bono legal services” per lawyer per year.

On 1 July 2020, the Target was opened to in-house legal team signatories for the first time. In-house signatories agree to use their best efforts to provide at least **20 hours** of pro bono legal services per lawyer per year.

Signatories report annually to the Centre on their performance against the Target.

For further information or comment, please contact the Australian Pro Bono Centre CEO, Gabriela Christian-Hare, at info@probonocentre.org.au.