As elder law attorneys, we have probably become accustomed to the hypothetical elder law queries from friends at cocktail parties or the “easy” questions from family members about Medicaid. While we may generally shrug off these questions as solicitations for free legal advice, there is actually a hard-felt need for our pro bono services in North Carolina. Consider these statistics from a 2016 Impact Report from the North Carolina Equal Access to Justice Commission:

- 80 percent of all civil legal needs of the poor go unmet each year. This includes legal representation for domestic violence, divorce, child custody, housing, consumer protection, employment, and health benefits.
- There is only one legal aid attorney for every 11,000 North Carolinians eligible for legal services. Conversely, there is one private lawyer for every 362 North Carolina residents.
- In 2016, over 2.2 million North Carolina residents were eligible for legal aid services.

If these statistics are not incentive enough to lessen this divide, there are additional reasons to devote your time and legal expertise to fellow North Carolinians in need.

North Carolina’s Rule of Professional Conduct 6.1 encourages each attorney licensed in North Carolina to devote 50 hours each year to pro bono legal services, legal services at a substantially reduced fee, or activities that improve the law, legal system, or legal profession. These services can be provided to individuals of limited means or even some organizations.

You can log these service hours at ncprobono.org/volunteer/reporting by providing basic information about your time and services rendered. Attorneys who report more than 50 hours of pro bono legal service in one year receive additional recognition from the Supreme Court of North Carolina and become members of the N.C. Pro Bono Honor Society.

If you practice in a particular geographic area, contact that local legal aid office directly about pro bono opportunities. You can also find pro bono opportunities online through the North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center at ncprobono.org, where you can search by geography, areas of law, population served, and any available support such as malpractice insurance or mentorship opportunities. Alternatively, you can select from your own client-base and offer your services at a reduced rate to a client in need. This last option is palatable to many elder law attorneys who are loathe to leave the comfort of their own substantive practice area.

As elder law attorneys, we know first-hand the urgent calls for help from institutionalized seniors who have only $2,000 in their name and have been denied for Medicaid. Be a force of change for the elder population that we serve and start reaping the rewards of pro bono work.

Kara Gansmann devotes her entire practice to elder law and estate planning in the Wilmington office of Cranfill Sumner & Hartzog LLP (CSH Law). In private consultations, Kara counsels individuals and families on tactics for estate planning, asset-protection, and long-term care planning. Kara drafts wills, powers of attorney, and trusts, including pet trusts and special needs trusts. Kara also advises clients on eligibility and applications for Medicaid, Special Assistance, and certain Veterans’ Benefits.