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Expanding Public Service in the COVID-19 Crisis

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To consider the great need, among people of limited means, for civil legal services during the COVID-19 crisis, a good starting point is where we were before the crisis started. In short, civil legal resources for the poor in the United States are woefully inadequate. According to the Legal Services Corporation, which documents the justice gap in America, between 62% and 72% of civil legal needs among low-income Americans are addressed inadequately or not at all. Indeed, the United States fares very poorly in this regard when compared to other western democracies.

The current health crisis would be devastating under any circumstances but, from a legal standpoint, this crisis has laid bare the long-term challenges we face.

The first priority should be for all law firms immediately to increase and expand public service efforts. Proskauer is helping small businesses and nonprofit organizations with various legal issues, including contract issues and employment matters especially. We are building out a pipeline of opportunities through our pro bono partners, many of whom are struggling in their own right. By providing help to legal services organizations as they manage a higher volume of matters, we can help them better serve their clients as we directly assist the community. Among other efforts, we are partnering with Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT) to help – by phone and online – families of limited means with a variety of legal issues.

Beyond doing as much as we can to meet the critical, immediate legal needs arising directly from this crisis, another priority should be substantially increasing government funding of civil legal services. When this crisis passes the health of our society will forever be gravely compromised if we do not start prioritizing one of our country's defining values: equal justice under the law.

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