

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

AROUND BROOKLYN: [5](#) | [Brooklyn restaurants scramble for survival](#) | [Four-story building planned](#)

New York sets up pro bono network to help people with legal matters during pandemic

April 1, 2020 Rob Abruzzese



Image: Pexels

The NYS Bar Association and the state’s Unified Court System announced this week that they have partnered together to create a network of pro bono lawyers willing to help out with the surge in legal matters that are expected to come out of the coronavirus pandemic and the likely economic fallout.

“At this unprecedented moment in our state and nation’s history, we all need to do what we can to support one another and ensure that we will not only meet this challenge but emerge from it stronger and more united than ever before,” said Chief Judge Janet DiFiore. “I know that members of New York’s talented and big-hearted legal community are up to the task, and I applaud NYSBA for joining with us in this effort.”



NYSBA President Henry M. Greenberg. Photo courtesy Henry M. Greenberg

Currently the court system is mostly shut down, with only the Family Court and Criminal Court open and operating via videoconferencing. Other courts are expected to open by the end of the week using remote conferencing, but they will only be hearing emergency cases.

Once courts open again, it is not expected to immediately go back to normal as there will likely be a backlog of cases that are piling up that will need to be heard. Attorneys are also speculating that there will be a whole new category of issues arising due to the economic fall out of the virus. This pro bono network is attempting to protect those most vulnerable.

“We have rapidly transformed our court system to keep judges, court personnel, lawyers and litigants out of harm’s way,” Chief Judge DiFiore added. “But we must be forward-looking now, because the virus will present new challenges when we return to our courthouses and adjudicate all the pending cases that have been postponed and new cases that will arise. I am acutely aware that lawyers are sacrificing so much to put the needs of society first at a time of immense uncertainty in their personal lives.”



Chief Judge Janet DiFiore announced this week a pro bono network of lawyers who will help those dealing with legal issues that arise from the coronavirus pandemic. Photo: Rob Abruzzese/Brooklyn Eagle

The courts and the NYSBA are expected to convene meetings in the coming weeks and months with local and affinity bar associations, some major law firms, legal aid providers and the heads of the 15 law schools to assemble the network of free lawyers.

“With New York City as the epicenter of the pandemic and the economy at a standstill, we are facing unprecedented legal challenges that will transform the profession and society as we know it,” said Hank Greenberg, president of NYSBA. “Lawyers have always led in times of crisis and our state and profession needs NYSBA’s leadership now more than ever before.”

Chief Judge DiFiore and NYSBA President Greenberg have gotten former Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, who is of counsel at Latham & Watkins, to lead the effort in creating the network.

The idea for the commission came following Gov. Andrew Cuomo's plea for retired health care professionals to volunteer to be a reserve corps for doctors and nurses working to contain the spread of COVID-19. After more than 60,000 people responded, the legal community took notice.

"Experts are already predicting a surge in a wide variety of cases as a result of the coronavirus crisis and aggressive steps taken to combat it," Chief Judge DiFiore said. "Though the state's legal community is being hit hard by the economic fallout of this virus, there is no doubt in my mind that many attorneys will heed our call for volunteers. We are New Yorkers, and we take care of one another in tough times."

Greenberg said that he hopes the network becomes a nationwide model for state bar associations. He explained that once the courts open again, that there will be a rush to bring cases. He fears that only people will not have the means to hire attorneys to represent them because existing pro bono structures will be put to their limits.

The NYSBA also committed to provide resources and guidance to small firms and solo practitioners who suffer as a result of the coronavirus.
