

 [Click to Print](#) or Select '**Print**' in your browser menu to print this document.

Page printed from: [Corporate Counsel](#)

What Exelon Did to Win Pro Bono Honors

Jennifer Williams-Alvarez, Corporate Counsel

March 9, 2017

The Pro Bono Institute has named Exelon Corp.'s legal department as the recipient of its 2017 Laurie D. Zelon Pro Bono Award for its "pro bono efforts and leadership within the legal community to increase pro bono legal services and improve access to justice."

"We're thrilled to receive this," said Exelon senior vice president and general counsel Thomas O'Neill of the award, which will be presented at the institute's annual conference in Washington, D.C., on Thursday. "It's a great honor and it's a testament to the work we've done historically and that we'll continue to do."

Since 2000, the Pro Bono Institute has annually honored an individual or organization based on pro bono efforts and leadership within the legal community. The award was named in honor of California Court of Appeal Justice Laurie Zelon, who won it in 2000 when she was with Morrison & Foerster.

Other recipients of the award include Bank of America Corp.'s legal department in 2008 and general counsel [Brad Smith along with Microsoft Corp.'s department of legal and corporate affairs](#) in 2014.

Exelon's legal department implemented a formal pro bono program in 2002, said O'Neill, who was named general counsel in January. At the core of this program is a pro bono committee that comes up with a calendar of events every year that includes a minimum of four clinics per year in each of four cities—Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

There is purposeful rotation of those on the committee, which provides leadership opportunities for a number of the people in the department, visibility for those in the leadership positions and support for the program in the ranks, according to O'Neill.

"You create this top-to-bottom culture of participation where everybody is supporting everybody else," he said.

This structure has meant that most of the attorneys and support staff in the legal department are participating in some way, O'Neill said. In 2016, for example, nearly two-thirds of the 224-person legal department participated in the pro bono efforts. And over the years, according to the general counsel, members of the legal department have been involved in matters ranging from legal advice for seniors, to work with veterans and drafting end-of-life documents for first responders in connection with the Wills for Heroes Foundation.

"In any given year, we have day jobs and people get called into different projects, so we try to not force it," O'Neill said. "But I'm not aware of people who just don't participate."

O'Neill pointed to a number of reasons why pro bono work is such a priority for the legal department. For one, potential employees want to be able to participate in this kind of work, he said, so it's a way to attract good talent.

And perhaps most importantly, it's a core value for the company to represent the communities Exelon serves, said O'Neill. "The culture of the corporation is about giving back to the communities we serve," he explained. "If you think about our business and how we serve our communities ... we're really interwoven into the fabric of the communities we serve just by the nature of our business."

This commitment to pro bono work goes beyond just Exelon's own legal department. When outside law firms are retained, said O'Neill, it's expected that "lawyers will recognize the need for legal services for the disadvantaged."

What's more, the legal department also mentors other companies looking to start their own in-house pro bono programs, O'Neill said. "Over the years, legal departments from several companies have approached us seeking advice on how to start their own pro bono programs, how to structure them and how to launch pro bono legal clinics," he explained. "Most recently, we helped [credit card company] Discover bring a legal clinic supporting first responders to their hometown."

"To me, the recipe here is value-driven leadership and a commitment to doing the service and setting it up in a way that allows for attorney and staff participation and involvement," O'Neill said.

Contact Jennifer Williams-Alvarez at jwilliams@alm.com.
