

Why a New Generation of Financial Advisors Is Seeking Out Pro Bono Work

Story by Cheryl Winokur Munk

Some financial advisors find the greatest reward comes from something other than a paycheck. They derive satisfaction by helping clients who need, but can't afford, their services.



The CFP Board recommends that accredited professionals commit to a minimum of 20 hours per year of service, and it also encourages firms that employ CFPs to support them in these efforts.

Pro bono work also helps firms attract young talent. A whopping 83% of aspiring CFP professionals say they're more likely to choose a firm that actively supports volunteer or community service, according to data from the Foundation for Financial Planning, a charitable organization that expands access to pro bono financial planning for people in crisis or need. Its data show that CFP professionals under the age of 35 felt more intensity in their commitment to pro bono efforts than their older peers.

Jon Dauphiné, chief executive of the Foundation for Financial Planning, says he's hoping the financial advisory industry will follow the lead of law firms, which have widely embraced charitable and community service-oriented programs. The organization's data show that 70% of all current CFPs want advisory firms to be more like law firms in

supporting civic engagement, a sentiment mirrored by 84% of rising entrants to the profession. Pro bono work within financial services is still in its infancy, but it's gaining momentum, he says.

Why advisors volunteer. Advisors say they enjoy pro bono work for several reasons, including the desire to make an impact on those less fortunate.

Dennis Elias, a senior manager in the McLean, Va., office of San Francisco-based Andersen Tax, has been doing projects on a volunteer basis for about five years. He typically serves high-net-worth and ultrahigh-net-worth individuals, but ventured into pro bono projects because he wanted to help people like his mother, an immigrant who didn't know much about the financial system when he was growing up.

Elias says he finds it especially meaningful to assist people who can't otherwise afford financial education, since helping them understand things like the importance of an emergency fund and paying down high interest rate debt first can have a long-term impact.

"It's almost like a multiplier effect," he says. "You teach parents and they'll teach their kids, who then won't have to figure it out when they're 25 and financially struggling."

Opportunities run the gamut. Pro bono work for Elias has included six-to-12-month mentoring engagements, one-on-one financial coaching, and group presentations on topics like credit scores and insurance.

Advisors at another firm, Morton Wealth in Calabasas, Calif., often help adults who have aged out of foster care and live in group homes.

Stacey McKinnon, chief operating officer at Morton Wealth, counseled a young woman who had maxed out several credit cards and was planning to negotiate with settlement companies, a move she figured would be an easy way out of debt. McKinnon talked to her about the credit implications and other downsides, helping her devise a plan to make monthly payments instead. The repayment path was harder for the woman, but gave her a greater sense of financial responsibility, which McKinnon hopes will help guide future decisions. "I feel I was able to teach her something that will hopefully help her be more successful in life," she says.

Sydney Woodward, a financial planner with Yeske Buie in San Francisco, helped a woman pay down her credit card and determine how to fund her education. She also assisted the woman, whose husband had been deported, find new insurance for her 10-year-old son. By the end of their yearlong relationship, the client not only had insurance for her son, but she'd also paid off a few thousand dollars of debt. "She felt like she had the tools to continue without continuing to meet with us," Woodward says.

Pro bono relationships are usually for a finite period, which could mean one or two meetings, a few months, or a year, depending on the arrangement. When an engagement ends, there's no expectation of ongoing communication. In fact, many firms don't allow nonbillable clients to become paying clients. "When we're doing pro bono work, it's supposed to be objective," Woodward says. "We're not selling our firm."

How to find opportunities. There are many options for advisors to find volunteer or community service work. The Foundation for Financial Planning offers a matching program for CFPs, allowing them to select projects based on their interests and available time. Any CFP professional in good standing can [create an account](#) to sign up for available opportunities.

Additionally, many charities have volunteer opportunities for financial professionals. These include United Way, Habitat for Humanity, AARP, Goodwill Industries, and Legal Aid organizations. Financial advisory firms can also form partnerships with other local or national nonprofits that team members feel strongly about. Woodward, director of pro bono for the San Francisco chapter of the Financial Planning Association, also finds opportunities through this organization.

In 2023, the CFP Board of Directors approved a resolution encouraging CFP professionals to participate in pro bono financial planning. The CFP Board recommends that accredited professionals commit to a minimum of 20 hours per year of service, and it also encourages firms that employ CFPs to support them in these efforts.

Firms should make civic work part of their culture, whether it's required or voluntary, advisors say. McKinnon of Morton Wealth says about two-thirds of the firm's advisors do pro bono work even though it isn't a requirement. They "catch the bug," she says.

Yeske Buie recently implemented a 10-hour pro bono requirement for financial planners. Woodward, who is in charge of the initiative, says she does about 25 hours of charitable projects per year, on average, which equals a few hours a month.

"It's a balancing act for sure, but 25 hours in a year isn't too crazy," she says. "It feels like a big number, but when you're doing it, it doesn't feel like you're taking away from the work you're doing for your paying clients."