

PRO BONO QUÉBEC is ready to steer people to lawyers who will provide free service. It's about ensuring access to justice

'For the public good'

IRWIN BLOCK THE GAZETTE

The Quebec Bar Association's offer of free legal services is not yet off the ground but already more than 100 potential clients have asked for help.

Sitting in the freshly painted offices of Pro Bono Québec, general manager Michèle Moreau says the bar's offer is all about "access to justice for the middle class."

Once Pro Bono – Latin for "for the public good" – is ready for clients in April, the service could cover anything from family law to a criminal case or civil suit.

"We have excluded nothing; the only criterion is public interest," said Moreau, formerly a labour lawyer for the Université du Québec à Montréal. She was named after the Quebec Bar's general council decided in September to set up the service.

To qualify for a free lawyer, you'll have to go through a means test: you won't get help if you're eligible for legal aid, which this year sets an income threshold at \$12,149 for a single person, and \$20,548 if you're married and have two kids.

You won't be eligible for the service you can afford your own lawyer, either.

A committee of lawyers will review requests and decide which are deserving. Law students will be asked to help.

In Ontario, where that bar association already has a pro bono service, it works by theme, Moreau explained.

For example, "they have a child advocacy project, where they look after health, education, immigration and other areas affecting kids."

The bar effort here will function as a general referral service.

"We will have a bank of hours from lawyers who agree to give free legal services. We will match the client to the lawyer, and they will have the same relationship as with a paying client."

The same ethical standards will apply.

The goal is to provide free legal services, but it is also possible that the first 50 hours could be free, or that a lawyer will work at a reduced rate.

Moreau stresses this service is not go-



JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE

Lawyer Michèle Moreau has been busy launching Pro Bono Québec, and says the office already has more than 100 potential clients who need free legal service.

ing to take work away from full-price lawyers, whose hourly rates can range from \$100 to \$900 in some cases.

"We're getting cases where the person would represent himself – very badly in some cases. In complex cases, you can't represent yourself if you're not a lawyer."

A lot of lawyers already do pro bono work, but they don't advertise it. It is expected some of them will accept cases through Pro Bono Québec.

Her message to fellow lawyers: "We have a beautiful profession and if you want to give back, this is it."

Fourteen major city law firms have already pledged a total of 10,000 hours – equivalent to \$3 million in fees – and lawyer Guy Pratte of Borden, Ladner,

Gervais LLP was instrumental in advocating it.

"The sole motivation here is to improve citizen access to justice," Pratte said. "Lawyers in small and large firms are calling me and offering to help out."

"The first goal is access to justice. If it has as an ancillary benefit to improve our image, so much the better."

Civil rights lawyer Julius Grey, whose office also takes pro bono cases, agreed.

The bar's office will be particularly useful where there is so much preparatory work in a potential case that a lawyer who does do some pro bono work would be obliged to refuse, Grey said.

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