

A world of good: Dechert's pro bono program

Dechert LLP has a longstanding tradition of providing pro bono legal services to individuals and organizations who cannot otherwise afford legal counsel. We approach our pro bono efforts with the same energy, enthusiasm and resources as our work for commercial clients, and our associates receive billable hour credit for their pro bono work.

By the numbers

89,000+ We recorded more than 89,000 hours of pro bono work in 2021.

5% Our pro bono hours are equivalent to more than 5% of our billable hours annually.

1,500 We have more than 1,500 open pro bono matters at any given time.

25 All lawyers are required to perform at least 25 hours of pro bono work per year.

21 Our Pro Bono Committee members represent the local interests of each of Dechert's 21 offices.

10 In 2021, *The American Lawyer* ranked Dechert in the top 10 for international (#2) and national (#9) pro bono.

A snapshot of our pro bono work

At Dechert, we have a “big tent” approach to pro bono work. We strive to find projects that make a difference in our communities and match the interests and skill sets of our lawyers. Some of the major areas we handle include civil rights, criminal, death penalty, family law, human rights, immigration, landlord/tenant, nonprofit and charity advice, prisoners’ rights, public benefits, special education, veterans and voting rights.

Innocence Project

Prior to becoming a lawyer, James Figorski served as a Philadelphia police officer for more than two decades. As a Dechert attorney, James volunteered with the Innocence Project of Pennsylvania, reviewing case files of inmates alleging their innocence. In 2011, he came across the file of Shaurn Thomas, who was serving time for a murder he allegedly committed when he was 16 years old. James felt that there were facts in this case that did not add up, so he worked tirelessly to investigate the crime. He uncovered instances of prosecutorial misconduct, inconsistent eyewitness testimony and missing case files. On Mother’s Day 2017, Mr. Thomas’ conviction was overturned, his sentence vacated, and he was released from prison. In September, Dechert filed a civil rights suit against the City of Philadelphia and police officers involved with the underlying conviction. That case is pending.

Voting Rights

Dechert has long been active in the area of voting rights and has pursued cutting edge legal challenges against eight states for their election practices, including issues relating to voter ID, failure to register voters applying for public benefits, discriminatory statewide election of judges, lack of early voting options and erroneously purged voter rolls.

Along with co-counsel from the ACLU Voting Rights Project and the ACLU of Kansas, we obtained a major victory and sanctions against Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, after Kansas imposed unduly strict proof-of citizenship requirements for voter registration that fell heaviest on poor and marginalized voters. A Kansas federal court permanently enjoined the measures and imposed sanctions on Kobach for misleading the court and violating federal rules. For this work, the *Financial Times* awarded the team a “Standout” Award at its “Innovative Lawyers Awards” event.

Standing Up for Detained Immigrant Families

Under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s new “zero tolerance” immigration policy, families who are apprehended while crossing the border (legally or illegally) are being detained for weeks or even months, waiting for their opportunity to plead their cases to an immigration judge. Most of these families are mothers with young children coming from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, fleeing gang persecution, domestic violence or deteriorating living conditions.

Dechert has partnered with Human Rights First and Aldea, the People’s Justice Center, and are the only law firm pro bono presence on the ground at the Berks County (Pennsylvania) Family Immigration Detention Center. We are taking multi-day shifts at the detention center, conducting intake of newly arrived families, providing orientations and helping screen their cases for legal merit. For those families who identify a fear of return to their home countries, our lawyers work remotely to prepare the families for their credible fear interviews. We then represent them in the interview process, including any appeals or requests for reconsideration in immigration court.

Freedom Now

A key focus at Dechert has been international prisoner of conscience matters. In recent years, Dechert has handled more than 25 cases with Freedom Now, a non-profit that represents prisoners of conscience. Dechert lawyers liaise with local counsel and families of imprisoned clients; draft and submit petitions to the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; and coordinate advocacy efforts with governments and special interests groups to secure our clients’ release. Several of Dechert’s Freedom Now clients have been liberated from prison, including individuals from Uzbekistan, Mauritania, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan and Myanmar. Clients include Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt, inter-faith peace activists in Myanmar sentenced to hard labor on trumped-up charges; and Diane and Adeline Rwigara, a Rwandan presidential candidate who faced up to 22 years in prison for criticizing the Rwandan government.

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