

Pro Bono 2026: Pro Bono Update and Goals By: Judge Grace E. Robson*

*With the much appreciated assistance of intern Baker Wilcox

The judges and attorneys in the Middle District of Florida are busy! During the 12-month period ending March 31, 2026, our district was second in the nation with 27,925 bankruptcy cases filed, reflecting a 27.4% increase over the number of filings in the same period in 2025.¹ It is probably no surprise that our district has many individuals who file cases on their own.

As you can see from the statistics below,² pro se filings for 2026 are on track to exceed the numbers from 2025.

2025 Pro Se Case Filings

Division	Chapter 7	Chapter 11	Chapter 12	Chapter 13	Chapter 15	Total Cases
Ft. Myers	78	6	0	32	3	119
Jacksonville	301	13	1	135	1	451
Orlando	630	17	0	298	1	946
Tampa	715	18	3	304	0	1040
District	1724	54	4	769	5	2556

2026 YTD Pro Se Case Filings (though June 21, 2026)

Division	Chapter 7	Chapter 11	Chapter 12	Chapter 13	Chapter 15	Total Cases
Ft. Myers	54	0	0	19	0	73
Jacksonville	172	5	1	106	0	284
Orlando	396	8	0	159	0	563
Tampa	428	6	2	232	1	669
District	1050	19	3	516	1	1589

¹ United States Courts, *Bankruptcy Cases Filed, Terminated, and Pending*, (June 8, 2026), https://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/document/bf_f_0331.2026.pdf.

² Thanks to Sara Mason for compiling this data.

While individuals have the right to represent themselves, I will paraphrase the late great Chief Judge Emeritus A. Jay Cristol, who I often heard in court say to self-represented individuals something to the effect of, “Yes, you can represent yourself, but if you needed surgery, would you perform surgery on yourself?” Judge Cristol’s point was that bankruptcy is complex, and it is advisable to have an attorney assist navigating a case to reduce any negative consequences that could be avoided if one has proper advice. Which leads me to the importance of pro bono work in our bankruptcy system.

Giving your precious time to assist others in our bankruptcy system provides tremendous benefits. First, there is personal satisfaction of assisting others. In addition, the time you spend on assisting people who would otherwise be unrepresented results in more consensual resolutions, narrowing of issues, and the general more expedient administration of cases and proceedings that allows judicial resources to be used for the more complex and time-consuming matters.

I know it is a lot to ask people who bill by the hour to give their time. The American Bar Association has cited a lack of time as the biggest challenge to attorneys providing pro bono work.³ Despite the challenge of a demanding schedule, pro bono work plays a vital role in our society. Pro bono work helps bridge the justice gap in our society, defined as “the disparity between the legal needs of low-income individuals and available resources.”⁴ Bridging this justice gap helps protect vulnerable individuals who face a complex legal system. In addition, pro bono work can promote faith in the judiciary. A 2024 Gallup poll measures Americans’ faith in the judicial system at 35%.⁵ Pro bono work can help increase faith in the judiciary, as it promotes judicial resolution on the merits, diminishing the influence of financial capacity.

In addition to this important role in society, since 1993, the Florida Supreme Court has called on lawyers to aspire to at least 20 hours of pro bono work a year or contribute \$350 to a legal aid organization⁶ (with inflation, that would be comparable to \$830 in 2026). The ABA sets a loftier goal of 50 pro bono hours a year.⁷ Under Rule 4-6.1(a) of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar, members of the bar should (1) render pro bono legal services to the poor and (2) participate, to the extent possible, in other pro bono service activities that directly relate to the legal needs of the poor.

³ American Bar Association, *Supporting Justice V 2* (2024).

⁴ LegalClarity Team, *Why Is Pro Bono Work Important for Justice?*, LegalClarity, (June 5, 2026), <https://legalclarity.org/why-is-pro-bono-work-important-for-justice/>.

⁵ Benedict Vigers and Lydia Saad, *Americans Pass Judgment on Their Courts*, Gallup, (June 3, 2026), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/653897/americans-pass-judgment-courts.aspx>.

⁶ *Amends. to Rules Regulating The Fla. Bar 1-3.1(a) & Rules of Jud. Admin. 2.065 (Legal Aid)*, 630 So. 2d 501, 508 (Fla. 1993).

⁷ American Bar Association, *supra*, at 3.

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While these goals are aspirational, and not mandatory, it is still important to reflect on how we can better serve our community. There are lots of ways attorneys can provide pro bono services.

First, there is the bankruptcy pro se clinic. As I hope you are all aware, the Middle District of Florida has a Bankruptcy Pro Se Assistance Clinic (www.bankruptcyproseclinic.com) which helps many individuals through free consultations provided by our generous attorney volunteers. We have seen the number of consultations increase exponentially year over year from 87 in 2022 to 1,117 in 2025. In 2026, volunteer attorneys have provided 647 consultations as of May 31, 2026 – which means we are on track to continue this positive trend. As of May 15, 2026, we had 245 registered volunteers, which is amazing (thank you)! While we have a large number of registered volunteers, only 23 volunteers have recurring slots (i.e., weekly availability). So I would encourage those of you who have not done so, to please sign up to provide consultations on a recurring basis. Thirty minutes a week is an achievable commitment to pro bono that would significantly contribute to those in need.

Second, maybe you would consider serving as a mediator in connection with a contested matter or adversary proceeding. If so, please contact one of the liaisons (listed below) and let them know you are willing to serve in a mediator capacity.

Third, the Court has a legal assistance program (the “LAP”) which allows low-income individuals to receive pro bono services at the presiding judge’s discretion. If you are interested in serving in this capacity, you can fill out a simple form that you can find at https://www.flmb.uscourts.gov/legal_assistance/, and for your convenience, I am attaching the form to this article 😊.

For the LAP, each Court division has pro bono liaisons, who will liaise with the judges to assign attorney volunteers to a matter in which a judge has granted the application for pro bono services. The pro bono attorney liaisons for each of the divisions are listed below:

Jacksonville	Orlando	Tampa	Ft. Myers
Katheryn Hancock	Jennifer Morando Lauren Stricker Melissa Sydow Jonathan Sykes	Kathleen DiSanto	Christian Haman Shannon Puopolo

Don’t forget to let us know when you take on a pro bono representation. We want to recognize volunteers in the *Court Connection* newsletter. And some of our judges will even allow Zoom appearances by pro bono counsel or allow cases where pro bono counsel is involved to go to the top of the calendar at hearings. So, a reminder

that there are paperless events in CM/ECF to help the judges identify and recognize pro bono attorneys—

Bankruptcy Events → Miscellaneous

[Notice of Pro Bono Representation of Debtor\(s\) \(Paperless\)](#)

[Notice of Limited Pro Bono Representation of Debtor\(s\) \(Paperless\)](#)

Bankruptcy Events → Motions/Applications/Objections

[Application for Pro Bono Counsel](#)

Finally, I would encourage you to take part in Pro Bono Week, which takes place every year in October. Last year, our Court hosted its own Pro Bono Week celebrations, which was a smashing success. We highlighted pro bono events taking place around the district, including volunteer appreciation and education on how to overcome barriers to take cases on a pro bono basis.

Despite the volume of work we all have, it is encouraging to see many taking an active part in providing pro bono services. Please keep an eye out for information regarding Pro Bono Week 2026, coming this October 25 – 31, 2026!

**UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT
MIDDLE DISTRICT OF FLORIDA**

I wish to volunteer for the Court's Legal Assistance Program.

Name: _____
[Please print or type]

Address: _____

Telephone: _____
[Please include area code]

Division(s) in which I am willing to accept assignments (check all that apply): __FM __JAX __ORL __TPA

Please return this form by email to: flmb_probono@flmb.uscourts.gov