



# Vedder Community

Pro Bono Year In Review 2021

VedderPrice

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## An Extraordinary Need for Legal Services Exists, Especially Among Those Unable to Pay



Vedder Price is deeply committed to fulfilling our professional obligation to deliver pro bono legal services. This year’s Pro Bono Report contains information about some of our vital work in 2021 – including representation of vulnerable children and families, victims of human trafficking, and efforts to improve the lives of forgotten veterans.

In each calendar year, our firm allows associates to receive up to 100 hours of chargeable credit, and shareholders up to 75 hours, for pro bono work. Many of our people devote many more hours, and this report celebrates their commitment. Our pro bono clients receive the same high level of dedication, backed by the full resources of Vedder Price, as paying clients.

This report begins by highlighting some important stories, and continues by showing how we coordinate efforts with partner organizations, and encourage a wide range of volunteer efforts for improvement of communities we serve.



**Michelle T. Olson**  
*Shareholder and Co-Chair, Pro Bono Committee*



**Patrick W. Spangler**  
*Shareholder and Co-Chair, Pro Bono Committee*

# Fighting the Scourge of Human Trafficking

Many people assume slavery has disappeared as a global scourge, but human trafficking continues as an abusive variant that disproportionately affects women, girls, and vulnerable communities. The emotional and legal issues can take years – even decades – to resolve.

Take the case of Kendra Ross, a US citizen in servitude in a cult for nearly 10 years. Ross was put into service as a pre-teen, and shipped in the back of a delivery truck to a range of jobs for enterprises operated by the United Nation of Islam Inc. (UNOI), with locations in New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Kansas. After years of enduring abuse and being compelled to marry a polygamist in the cult, she managed to escape at age 21 with help from family and advocacy organizations. Pro bono attorneys sought restitution for her decade of unpaid labor. A federal court in 2018 granted her a settlement of nearly \$8 million against UNOI. Ross has not collected anywhere near the full amount, however, as the cult changed its name and moved assets. Ross has received continuing harassment – even death threats. A few years after the million-dollar judgment, nine members of the cult filed suit charging Ross with defamation of their organization at the Circuit Court for Prince George’s County, Maryland, and in Kansas state court. “I think of this part of the case as *The Empire Strikes Back*,” explains Anand Ramana, Shareholder in our Washington, DC office, who has worked on Kendra’s case for several years. “The nine complaints, which are all basically copycat in content, alleged Kendra breached her contractual agreements with the cult when she left the organization and appeared on multiple television programs to tell her story.” Vedder Price took on the nine defamation cases pro bono. “We removed all of the cases to their respective federal courts in Maryland and Kansas, and moved to dismiss each case,” he said. Vedder Price Associate Francisca Wolfenson helped manage many aspects of the case load. In Maryland, the court granted all five motions to dismiss. In its opinion,

the court recognized that membership in UNOI is akin to indentured servitude. The Kansas court later issued a 49-page memorandum opinion similarly dismissing our client from the four cases with prejudice. “These orders represent a tremendous win for our client and hopefully will help her move beyond the trauma of her trafficking,” Ramana said. Due to his years of pro bono work in this area, Ramana spoke at the 2022 Human Trafficking Conference, sponsored by Freedom Network USA. He is currently representing, also on a pro bono basis:

- A survivor, and witness for the prosecution, in the federal criminal case against Backpage.com executives accused of facilitating prostitution and money laundering.
- A domestic servant allegedly trafficked to the United States by Namibian diplomats. The suit has been filed against three parties: the diplomats, in federal court in Maryland, where the plaintiff resides; the nation of Namibia, alleging that the country financially benefited from forced labor; and the Ministry of Justice, also in Namibia. The diplomats have since moved from the Washington, DC area to Switzerland.



# Helping Veterans Transition to Civilian Life

The problems facing US veterans are numerous: traumatic brain injuries, unemployment, high rates of suicide, and homelessness. In 2021, Vedder Price attorneys and paralegals made a concerted push to help veterans make a successful reintegration back to civilian life.

As one example, Tom Conner, a Shareholder based in Washington, DC, took on a veteran's matter after receiving additional training and support, even though it was far from his scope of work as a securities lawyer. "We represented a US Navy veteran who did not receive an honorable discharge," he explained. "He had a general discharge, which has negative consequences in that it excludes access to GI Bill benefits."

Education can be vital for a successful transition. The veteran whom Conner represented had an exemplary service record in the Navy but, after declining to be transferred from his home base in Washington State to a rehabilitation center more than a thousand miles away, he was given a general discharge, which denied him access to education benefits. Due to popular misconceptions, not having an honorable discharge is often falsely assumed to mean a dishonorable discharge, which can block education and job opportunities for veterans, and also diminish self-esteem and increase depression risk. "We worked with the veteran to prepare and complete a personal statement, which argued that his exemplary record and prior judicial guidance provided the basis for an honorable discharge," said Conner. As of publication of this report, his statement is under review by the Naval Discharge Review Team.

"Some of these veterans are homeless – imagine them trying to solve these issues on their own," notes Anthony Pacheco, a Shareholder in Vedder Price's Los Angeles office. Many veterans need help connecting to Veterans Administration benefits, and they need support to find a better place in the community.



"I'm all about systems and structure, and we coordinate our efforts methodically," Pacheco says. Two years ago, Vedder Price received the 2020 Pro Bono Award from the Center for Veterans' Advancement (CFA) for the firm's outstanding support of the Center's discharge-upgrade clinic.

It takes time and persistence to gather the needed medical and military records, particularly for older veterans, to build a strong case. "We have two paralegals and a litigation-support person helping us communicate with our clients on pro bono matters," Pacheco said. "We also have a shareholder on each case, along with one or two associates, and monthly updates to keep us on track." Pacheco says he is "hopeful across the board" for successful outcomes in the veterans' cases. "We engage with our clients to think about the arguments to be made," he said. "The discussions often help them come to peace with their service."

# Seeking Solutions for Families in Crisis

Disputes over guardianship of children are fraught with emotion. Many cases arise due to parents who are in prison, or are suspected of domestic violence or severe substance abuse. But other cases don't fit the typical mold. Nusra Ismail, a Vedder Price Associate based in Chicago, has taken on the role of guardian ad litem in several disputes in Cook County, working closely with Chicago Volunteers Legal Services. Judges appoint a guardian ad litem to help determine the best interests of a child. The attorney speaks with the child and meets with parents and any other adults – such as teachers and physicians – who might have insight into the child's situation. "We essentially work as investigators, acting as the judge's eyes and ears," Ismail explains. Her most distinctive guardianship assignment in 2021 involved an inter-state dispute between a mother and grandmother. The grandmother had developed a close relationship with her grandson while his mother was at work in Chicago. After landing a better job in Texas, the mother wanted her son to relocate with her, but the grandmother wanted him to remain under her care in Chicago. After a thorough investigation, Ismail determined that – contrary to the public image of most child guardianship disputes – this was a case in which no "bad" person was involved. No red flags were raised in terms of child neglect or abuse. Ismail determined that both the mother and grandmother were loving toward the boy,

and each was financially capable of supporting him. Even after relocation to Texas, she found that the mother maintained steady contact with her son. At a status hearing before the judge, Ismail recommended mediation, thereby avoiding what might become a drawn-out and emotionally destructive family court battle. The parties eventually agreed to having the boy continue in Chicago with his grandmother through grade school graduation, with his mother remaining closely involved in decisions. For summer and winter breaks, the boy would stay in Texas with his mother. In addition, the agreement gave the boy leeway to relocate to Texas to live full time with his mother if he so desired. After the mediation, the mother and grandmother thanked Ismail for her assistance in resolving the dispute. "This was a rewarding case in which we were able to find a solution that worked for everyone," Ismail said.



In 2021 Vedder Price represented a Nigerian family seeking asylum in the United States. The family came from southern Nigeria, an area in which the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) is common. The family – parents, two daughters and a son – had applied for asylum on their own but had been turned down. Our firm represented the family in appealing the decision. At a hearing in Chicago, Vedder Price gave the opening statement and conducted a direct examination of the mother, who had been a victim of FGM. To avoid harm to their daughters, the family was determined not to return to their home country. The mother did not want her daughters to undergo FGM, yet the family's resistance resulted in attempts at kidnapping as well as death threats. Relocation for the family elsewhere in Nigeria was deemed inadvisable because of the wide geographic span of the clan that had threatened the family. In addition, Boko Haram and ISIS were known for inflicting violence against religious groups in the central and northern regions of Africa's most populous nation. Affidavits from physicians and psychologists were also helpful in mounting a successful appeal for this family. The US government granted asylum, and the family is now residing in Chicago.

# Pro Bono: By the Numbers

As part of our professional obligation, attorneys at Vedder Price are encouraged to provide pro bono legal services. Here's a quick overview of our firm's commitment by the numbers.

## Calendar Year 2021


Our attorneys and paralegals donated  
**9,200 Hours** to those in need



an increase of nearly **5%**  
above total hours logged in 2020.

More than half of our lawyers  
**53%**  did pro bono work.

**25 hours**  
Average number of pro bono  
hours donated per attorney.

**28%**   
Of our attorneys  
logged 30 or more hours.

**35%**   
Of our associates  
donated at least 30 hours.

**\$5+ million**   
Estimated value of pro bono services  
provided by Vedder Price in 2021.

# What Pro Bono Means to Me

“Fighting for the freedom of individuals serving life sentences for non-violent drug offenses is life-changing work. Regardless of our individual paths in life, we can all relate to asking for help and needing second chances. Providing support in a pro bono capacity to individuals who have spent the last 20-plus years in prison, when most of society has given up on them, has allowed me to see the difference this work truly makes once these individuals are released and begin their transition back into the community. There is no better feeling than seeing someone who thought he was going to spend the rest of his life behind bars become a contributing member of society. Working with Buried Alive, a non-profit fighting to free individuals serving draconian sentences due to outdated federal drug laws, has been a privilege and one of the highlights of my career.”



– **Arianna Goodman, Shareholder,**  
Dallas office

“Pro bono work on behalf of veterans is an opportunity to give back to the heroes keeping our nation safe and protecting our freedoms. It is heartbreaking to know of armed-forces veterans who have given so much service, yet, for one reason or another, have not received the help, treatment and, most of all, compassion that is vital for reintegration into society. It has been my honor to hear these veterans’ stories, understand their concerns, and help with the filing of appeals for honorable discharge status, which can boost their self-worth and enable a smoother, more productive return to civilian life.”



– **Napoleon Zapata, Paralegal,**  
New York office

“Pro bono has been a rewarding and highly supported part of my time at the firm. To me, pro bono has meant giving back to the community by providing legal services to people who otherwise would go unserved. I am grateful and sometimes surprised at the work I have been able to do, with the outcomes being meaningful personally for these clients, such as helping them protect their interests and getting a chance to start a new life in this country.”



– **Peter Walrod, Associate,**  
San Francisco office

“With increasing numbers of people exploring the world, and footfall only set to grow, it is ever more important we work together to ensure the impact of travel is wholly positive on people and places.

“It has been rewarding to assist the non-profit Travalyst organisation with their goal to change the impact of travel, for good. Travalyst plays a unique role in driving sustainability-building uniformity across the world’s largest travel platforms – and it’s exciting that Vedder Price has the opportunity to assist with this important work. Having been involved with the initiative since its inception, I have witnessed the development of the organisation both in mission and in size. The legal queries have been extremely varied, allowing me to develop a deeper understanding of sustainability challenges, to consider complex legal issues, and to collaborate with colleagues across practice areas to help Travalyst pursue important goals for the global travel industry.”



– **Henrietta Worthington, Solicitor,**  
London office



# Pro Bono Awards

Vedder Price congratulates the following offices and individuals for their outstanding commitment to pro bono service in 2021.

Our Los Angeles office, for the second year in a row, logged the most hours of any of Vedder Price's offices.

## Individual Winners Firmwide

- Shareholder                      Amy Bess, Washington, DC
- Associate                        Sudip Mitra, Chicago
- Paralegal                         Napoleon Zapata, New York

## Winners by Office

- Chicago                            Shareholder Brett Heinrich; Associate Kathryn Rosenbaum
- Washington, DC                Shareholder Anand Ramana; Associate Tamara Droubi
- London                            Solicitor Henrietta Worthington
- Los Angeles                      Shareholder Anthony Pacheco; Associate Deborah Hedley
- New York                         Shareholder Joshua Dunn; Associate Francisca Wolfenson
- San Francisco                    Associate Peter Walrod



# Partner Organizations

Vedder Price pro bono efforts are strengthened through partnership with not-for-profit organizations responding to a diverse range of needs. Our pro bono partners provide critical services to communities diverse in ethnic roots and levels of income.

Our Pro Bono Committee selects organizations in part by interest expressed by our attorneys, and also by the extent of need in communities that our firm serves in the United States and the United Kingdom.

In the United Kingdom, Vedder Price frequently works with **LawWorks**, a charity in England and Wales that connects people in need with volunteer

lawyers and not-for-profit organizations. In the United States, **Public Counsel** is the nation’s largest pro bono firm and is another organization with which Vedder Price collaborates.

To boost efficiency and obtain greater results from time invested in pro bono work, Vedder Price began partnering with Paladin in 2021. Paladin is an online platform helping law firms, companies, and law schools to source projects, manage pro bono work, and streamline tracking and outcome reporting. In addition to the organizations mentioned above, Vedder Price provides pro bono services to many other organizations, including but not limited to those below:



*“We align ourselves with charities offering consistently strong programming, support, and training for improved outcomes. As a result of our partnerships, our attorneys and paralegals have access to a broader range of opportunities to serve.”*

Mike Mulcahy  
Vedder Price General  
Counsel

In addition, Vedder Price provides pro bono services directly to the following organizations:



# VedderCares

## Events

Vedder Price was an external sponsor for the following charitable events in 2021:

- The Public Counsel Award Dinner
- The “On My Side Awards” organized by the Human Trafficking Legal Center
- The Annual Gala sponsored by the Lawyers for the Creative Arts
- Two events – Vino & Van Gogh, and Race Judicata – benefiting Chicago Volunteer Legal Services

In addition:

- Vedder Price made a donation in honor of Veterans Day to the Gary Sinise Foundation, a charity that offers programs, services, and events for wounded veterans. In addition, we thanked those at our firm for their military service: Aaron Bauer, Ryan Burandt (former associate and current counsel at Lincoln International), Daniel Green, Alan Haley, David Hernandez, Ron Hite, Michael Mulcahy, Gregory Scollan, Daniel Sherlock, and Jeremiah Vandermark.
- In July 2021, the firm made a donation to Felines and Canines on behalf of Dana Mehlman, who won Vedder’s second annual Cutest Pet Competition. Felines and Canines – a licensed 501(c)(3) no-kill animal shelter in Chicago – is the organization from which Dana adopted her charming cat, Zoe.
- Dan Spivey, Jason Faust, and Adam Winkel won the second annual Tournament of Associates. On their behalf, the firm made donations to Open Heart Magic, Pets for the Elderly, and the Nicholas J. Murphy Foundation.
- The Firm held an inaugural Pumpkin Carving Competition. Elsa Aybar won the competition, and a donation was made to PAWS Chicago on her behalf.

## Donation Drives

**March Donation Drive.** Vedder Price helped collect and donate essentials – such as soap, socks, and masks – for St. Luke’s Soup Kitchen, a ministry in New York City. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the dining area at St. Luke’s serves a hot meal to over 100 people.



**August School Supply Drive.** Ahead of the new school year, our US offices ran supply drives for local schools and organizations. In total, 60 full backpacks and a wide variety of school supplies were donated. The recipients included Cradles to Crayons (Chicago), Para Los Niños (Los Angeles), Thomson Elementary School (Washington, DC), PS9/Sarah Smith Garnet Elementary School (New York City), and Bayside Elementary School (San Francisco).

**Holiday Gift Drive.** Each of our offices organized a gift drive to benefit children in need. Organizations supported: Direct Effect Charities and Misericordia in Chicago; Toys for Tots in Washington, DC and Dallas; Brown Bag Lady in Los Angeles; Save the Children in London; and the Firefighters Toy Program in San Francisco. Additionally, the firm made donations to Rise Against Hunger, FareShare, and Arc Children’s Centre.

# Members of Our Pro Bono Committee

The Vedder Price Pro Bono Committee, which meets bimonthly, oversees the firm's activities, and works to develop relationships with pro bono agencies throughout the world. Michelle Olson and Patrick Spangler co-chair our committee, which includes the following:



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In addition, a support staff of approximately four individuals helps with marketing, administrative support and sustaining our relationships with partner organizations.



# VedderPrice

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Vedder Price P.C. is affiliated with Vedder Price LLP, which operates in England and Wales, Vedder Price (CA), LLP, which operates in California, and Vedder Price Pte. Ltd., which operates in Singapore.

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