



# Pro Bono's Newest Weapon

ROBERT LEVINS / Daily Journal

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**By Maya Meinert**  
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**L**OS ANGELES — Bet Tzedek, the free legal services organization whose name means "House of Justice" in Hebrew, has hired its first pro bono director, Elissa Barrett.

Barrett, who previously served as the director of Bet Tzedek's Sydney M. Irmas Housing Conditions Project, which advocates for the right of low-income tenants to live in safe, affordable housing, started in her new position two weeks ago.

"Poverty is deepening, and people need legal services beyond what we can provide as an organization," Barrett said. "There are many more people who are facing legal problems and are on a fixed or low income and can't afford a private attorney.

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She said that Bet Tzedek logs 18,000 pro bono hours a year, including time donated by law firms

and the organization's volunteers.

Mitchell A. Kamin, Bet Tzedek's president and chief executive officer, said the pro bono need is mounting.

"We've been successful in tapping into law firms and other private lawyers to support our work, but we found that the demand for our services, as it has for other legal services programs, has really been growing and the demand for pro bono [at law firms] has really been growing," Kamin said. "Matching those two needs will increase the amount of pro bono we do for our clients."

Ted Zepeda, who has served as Public Counsel's pro bono director for eight years, found the establishment of such a position significant.

"It's very exciting to have Bet Tzedek professionalizing and institutionalizing this position because it is so important," he said. "It's important to follow up and follow through with firms ... to motivate the firms to help out."

David Ackerly, director of private attorney involvement at Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, also noted the importance of having

a person dedicated to pro bono activities.

"It brings resources together and allows firms to have a single contact that they can call up," Ackerly said. "I often call pro bono directors 'matchmaker,' 'air traffic controller' and 'conciierge.' It makes it a much more efficient process to have someone they know they can contact who knows the issues because the person is a lawyer."

Barrett graduated from the University of Michigan Law School in 1998. She received a Bates International Fellowship from the school, which funded a year of post-graduate work with the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling in East Jerusalem.

**U**pon her return to the United States, she worked in business litigation at Loeb & Loeb, then in banking and finance litigation at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, both in Century City. In 2002, she joined Bet Tzedek.

"I've always been interested in public interest litigation — that's why I went to law school," she said. "I was grateful for the experience I

learned at law firms because it gave me the litigation chops I needed to serve the public. But I was hungry to return to public interest work."

Kamin pointed to Barrett's legal work in tenants' rights cases.

In *Action Apartment Association v. City of Santa Monica*, 2007 DJDAR 11793 (Cal. Aug. 2, 2007), Barrett filed an amicus brief that led to an agreement preserving the rights of the apartments' tenants.

Kamin also cited Barrett's representation of Inquilinos Unidos, a tenants' rights group, and 22 families against Amcal Multi-Housing Inc., in which her negotiations helped secure \$500,000 in relocation benefits for the tenants.

Attorneys from Jones Day and Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy, respectively, served as pro bono counsel on the cases. "Elissa is incredible," Kamin said.

"She's someone who can build a new program, which is what we were looking for. It's always wonderful to be able to reward someone who has worked so effectively for our clients. We're certain she's going to take our pro bono program to incredible new heights."