



June 2017 Tip of the Month

The Essential Skills for Counseling and Problem Solving at Clinics

Above all, we lawyers are counselors and problem solvers. As such, in every legal service we provide, we need to deeply understand our client's goals and capabilities, issue spot as well as problem solve, and be familiar with logistical barriers they may face. Only then can we provide the service most useful to them – in both our paid and volunteer work.

Without access to a lawyer, most in poverty have no effective remedy to the routine injustices they experience, such as unsafe housing, unpaid wages, failure to return security deposit, abusive phone calls from debt collectors, unfair lawsuits, and more. When we fully utilize our skills as advocate, counselor and problem solver, we can protect our clients' basic needs and promote their stability and well-being. (We also witness the strength and resilience of those living in difficult circumstances and learn more about the communities in which we live.)

Volunteering at clinics tends to be more challenging because of the time constraints. For that reason, many clinics have an experience requirement of their volunteers. And, to help attorneys new to clinics learn the ropes, VLN staff attorneys have interviewed the most effective clinics attorneys and compiled a list of the skills and practices that they regularly utilize. This list serves as the table of contents (see reverse) for a resource manual with three sections: 1) preparatory work; 2) legal clinic-specific and 3) information about VLN clients in general. Clinics attorneys are asked to review, learn, and use these skills.

To see the most recent version of this manual, visit the section *Essential Skills and Knowledge for Counseling and Problem Solving at Clinics* on www.vlnmn.org/volunteer-resources.

To suggest additional material, contact Delaney Russell, Education and Impact Director (Delaney.Russell@vlnmn.org).

Essential Preparatory Work Before the Clinics Shift

1. Find out the Top Issues at The Clinic and Learn the Law
2. Review Communication Tips
3. Prepare for Language, Cultural and Capacity Differences
4. Spend a Few Shifts Shadowing a VLN Resource Attorney or VLN Mentor Attorney

Skills Used During Clinic Shifts

1. Introduce Yourself and Build Rapport
2. Set Expectations, Start the Session, and Keep on Track
3. Identify and Prioritize the Issues
4. Provide Brief Services Whenever Appropriate
5. Maximize Impact of Advice and Next Steps: Write It Down
6. Tell Clients When No Legal Issue or Merit or When the Cost Might Outweigh the Benefit
7. Leverage Time Through Clinic Assistants
8. Use Onsite Resources
9. When Wrapping Up, Remind the Client of the Limited Scope of the Relationship
10. Use Free Time to Learn More

Universally Helpful Knowledge

1. Create Rapport and Engage the Client's Strengths
2. Understand and Avoid Five Common Communication Breakdowns
3. Partner with Social Supports When Possible
4. Learn About Different Types of Poverty
5. Understand the Impact of Race on Pro Bono Services
6. Overcome Misconceptions of our Justice System from an Immigrant Perspective
7. Work Effectively with Interpreters
8. Work Effectively with Clients with Mental Illness
9. VLN Clinic Standards
10. VLN Support for Volunteer Attorneys
11. VLN Volunteer Guiding Philosophy
12. VLN Clinic Data Sheet