



Daniel del Río of Mexico's Fundación Barra, Marcos Fuchs of Brazil's Instituto Pro Bono and Marcela Fajardo and Ciro Colombara, both of Chile's Fundación Pro Bono

## Fundación Barra Mexicana

Since its inception, Fundación Barra Mexicana has sought to provide some of Mexico's most disadvantaged individuals with legal advice. Like many clearing houses, the foundation aims to achieve this by providing a matchmaking service for lawyers and those in need of free legal services. Over the last 15 years, and despite many leading Mexican firms only recently beginning to institutionalise best-practices in pro bono work, there are signs it is slowly starting to achieve its goal.

Representative assignments include collaborations with the Junta de Asistencia Privada del Distrito Federal and the Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía, both NGOs, to provide all their legal needs. Previously, both organisations relied on a small number of in-house lawyers. On the government front, a recent agreement with the Mexican Internal Revenue Service will see them advise NGOs on their tax status, while looking to the future the foundation is currently involved in discussions to set up legal aid clinics across Mexico.

The appointment in 2012 of Daniel del Río as the foundation's president also seems to be reaping rewards, with the Basham, Ringe y Correa partner ushering in a raft of reforms which

have streamlined the foundation. "Del Río identified aspects of the work that weren't as good as we would like and restructured the foundation to make it work better," says Julio Copo, the secretary of council for the foundation. A move to digitalise all the organisation's files is cited by Copo as being particularly beneficial.

The foundation's marketing has also significantly improved under Del Río – it has made better use of its magazine to publicise its pro bono efforts and the projects it undertakes and delegates from the organisation now regularly give presentations at law firms. The aim is to raise awareness of pro bono work among the country's lawyers.

The foundation has also been working hard to encourage law firms to sign up to the Cyrus R Vance Center for International Justice's Pro Bono Declaration for the Americas, which commits firms to providing at least 20 hours of free legal services per year.

Its efforts appear to be paying off: *Latin Lawyer's* latest pro bono survey shows that Mexican firms are increasingly institutionalising the practice of pro bono and report a broad range of work – far beyond general corporate matters. Environmental, anti-corruption, education, labour, human rights and

immigration matters are all cited as areas they work in. "Before, pro bono used to be based on the goodwill of the attorney, but now firms are starting to understand that they can be agents of change," says Copo. "What is more, clients are becoming interested in a firm's pro bono credentials. These factors are definitely driving the institutionalisation of pro bono work in Mexican firms."

However there is still a long way to go. One aspect the foundation would like to change is funding. Currently, the organisation relies on donations to survive, but the foundation is keen to adopt a model whereby firms pay to be members. "The idea is to minimise the cost for the bar, and to spread it across the firms", says Copo. This kind of model is already in place in jurisdictions across the world, including fellow Latin American countries Chile and Colombia.

Despite the many challenges pro bono still faces in Mexico, the foundation is keen to stress that much progress has been made and that the future is bright. Beyond anything else, Copo believes pro bono offers lawyers, who are among the most privileged people in Latin America, a unique opportunity to give back to society.