

SPOTLIGHT

# Pro bono secondments: responding to the migrant crisis

How we're helping those fleeing the war in Ukraine.



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## Pro bono secondments: responding to the migrant crisis

**I**n the first of a series of features covering the Firm's major commitment to pro bono secondments, we find out about two projects that are helping Ukrainian migrants on their arrival in Poland.

White & Case offices around the world have risen to the challenge of the war in Ukraine and the resulting migrant crisis.

Ukraine's neighbour Poland has welcomed a huge volume of people fleeing the country, with an estimated 7.9 million Ukrainians and others crossing the border seeking shelter.

Now, nearly a year on from the start of the conflict, the perfect storm of high inflation and economic uncertainty has heaped more pressure on the country as it deals with this humanitarian crisis.

"As the months have gone on, the reality that this is a long-term challenge and commitment has really hit home with the Polish people," says new Partner Aleksandra Oziemska, who has been coordinating the office's response. "As an office, everyone has been united in understanding the gravity of the situation and showing compassion, with virtually all of us offering help in one way or another or providing accommodation."

"We also wanted to ensure our legal expertise was put to good use, because many people are coming to Poland without any language skills or idea of where to go, how long they might have to stay, their rights or how to seek asylum."

"Understandably, the Polish government wasn't prepared for this huge movement of people, so access to essential legal services was initially non-existent."



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ALEKSANDRA OZIEMSKA,  
PARTNER, WARSAW



## VOLUNTEERS AID SAFE PASSAGE FOR REFUGEES +

To bridge that gap, European Lawyers in Lesvos – our secondment partner for providing pro bono legal assistance to migrants from around the world arriving in Greece – approached the Firm about setting up a new project in Poland.

Together with several other firms with Warsaw offices, we launched a pilot called the Ukraine Pro Bono Collaborative (UPBC) that sees qualified lawyers provide pro bono legal assistance to those fleeing Ukraine.

Aleksandra says: "With thousands of people navigating an increasingly complex asylum process, the work the UPBC project does is vitally important. We're filling a gap that the Polish state hasn't been able to.

Associate Aleksandra Stepniewicz took part in the pilot. She volunteered her time over the project's standard two-week period, providing legal advice on a range of issues at Blue Dot Centers, which are refugee support hubs operated in collaboration by the UNCHR and UNICEF, in Warsaw and the metropolitan area.



*Aleksandra Stepniewicz (pictured above) offered advice to refugees on legal and other issues*

She says: "I assisted more than 100 Ukrainians across three locations where problems varied greatly. At the UNHCR center, I was helping people who have been in Poland for some time and whose legal issues are more complex and require research, such as questions relating to employment, taxes, legal guardianship, disabled people and advice on setting up for a long-term stay in Poland.

"The issues were very different in the Nadarzyn Blue Dot Center, which has been housing around 3,000 people in two big halls for almost eight months, including new arrivals and many of the most vulnerable in society, including the elderly, families and women with young children.

"Many of the migrants have no idea what to do next, with limited language skills and no money, so the advice needed is more basic.

"It's as much about giving them a chance to be heard, because they've got no privacy, no intimacy and, until this pilot scheme was launched, no access to basic legal advice."



THE STRATEGY BEHIND OUR PRO BONO SECONDMENTS 

As well as being complex from a legal perspective, the secondment was also emotionally draining.

Aleksandra says: "The experience was challenging and sometimes overwhelming. As the main pro bono lawyer at the time, I felt a huge responsibility because we want to help everyone in need and provide the best possible answers.



**"It was emotionally very difficult at times, meeting and trying to assist people who had experienced torture and sexual abuse in Ukraine or had post-traumatic stress disorder."**

ALEKSANDRA STEPNIEWICZ,  
ASSOCIATE, WARSAW

"Many of the migrants have just arrived from the warzone and are desperate for help. As a result, they need straight answers quickly, even though providing straight answers is hard because regulations and approaches are changing by the day.

"It was emotionally very difficult at times, meeting and trying to assist people who had experienced torture and sexual abuse in Ukraine or had post-traumatic stress disorder.

"One family had experienced torture in Luhansk, Ukraine and, as well as needing basic legal assistance on their arrival in Poland, they needed help reporting the proof of the war crimes. They were understandably very emotional, but they were incredibly grateful for our help.

"I had to assist people with mental health problems and sexually abused women, arranging psychological help for them in Poland as well as offering legal advice. I also helped an elderly lady who was alone and wanted me to help her search for her grandchildren.

"These are experiences that I'll remember forever."

Since the project launched at the beginning of August 2022, it has already assisted more than 1,000 people.

Aleksandra says: "For me as a lawyer it was incredibly helpful, giving me face-to-face contact with clients that I don't regularly have in my day job. I learned so much – how to communicate, behave, empathise with people's emotions and

work with a translator – all things that will benefit my work in future. I'd encourage anyone to take the opportunity."

Aleksandra also thanked the Litigation team in the Warsaw office who had to take on the extra workload when she was working on the project.

She says: "It's been a real team effort and it wouldn't have been possible without them."

Aleksandra Oziemska adds: "Aleks was incredibly brave to be the first lawyer to take part in the program, not knowing where she was going or what to expect. Two more Warsaw associates have since volunteered and, if any other Polish speakers with knowledge of Polish law are interested in getting involved, please contact me for more details."

**Working with vulnerable groups and traumatized clients on pro bono matters can lead to feelings of vicarious trauma for those who assist them. If you feel you could benefit from mental health support in this, or any situation, please contact the Firm's [Employee Assistance Program](#). Local offices also have additional programs. Please [contact the Wellness Team](#) to find out more.**



# Volunteers aid safe passage for refugees



Another example of our pro bono response to the war in Ukraine is the part we've played in another multi-firm pro bono project to support refugees in Poland.

The project is being run in collaboration with charity [Safe Passage International](#), which helps unaccompanied child refugees and vulnerable adults find safe, legal routes to sanctuary.

It offers UK-qualified lawyers from London (partners and associates from any department) the chance to spend a minimum of 10 working days on secondment under the supervision of Safe Passage International's expert lawyers at Blue Dot Centers in Warsaw and other locations that are serving refugees.

The volunteers help refugees check their eligibility for the UK's refugee settlement schemes and, if eligible, assist them with their application.

The first volunteer to sign up for the program was London Associate Oliver Dean.

He says: "My time working with Safe Passage International was extremely humbling. Many of the refugees have been forced to flee their homes, lives and loved ones. They are overwhelmingly grateful for the chance to begin the process of rebuilding their and their family's life in the UK.

"With no sign that the flow of Ukrainian refugees into Poland is going to slow any time soon, I have no doubt that anyone who volunteers for this program in future will have as worthwhile an experience as I did.

"Working alongside the tremendously dedicated team at Safe Passage International only made the experience more rewarding."

UK qualified lawyers who would like to volunteer for Safe Passage International should contact [sophie.orr@whitecase.com](mailto:sophie.orr@whitecase.com).

**"I have no doubt that anyone who volunteers for this program in future will have as worthwhile an experience as I did."**

OLIVER DEAN,  
ASSOCIATE, LONDON



**"The Firm's support for these programs is generous and consistent. It allows us to meet our obligation as lawyers to give back in a really extraordinary way."**

LOUIS O'NEILL, COUNSEL AND  
DIRECTOR OF PRO BONO



## The strategy behind our pro bono secondments

The Firm makes a significant investment in multiple pro bono secondments across the world, reflecting all three of its values – human, pioneering, united – and its strong commitment to pro bono service.

Counsel and Director of Pro Bono Louis O'Neill says: "We're strategic about our secondments, working with existing pro bono clients to deepen relationships and add value, while providing great training and growth opportunities for associates, and focusing on placements that complement our global footprint and skills. The Firm's support for these programs is generous and consistent. It allows us to meet our obligation as lawyers to give back in a really extraordinary way."

Senior Manager of Pro Bono and Global Citizenship Sophie Orr adds: "We find that through secondments, our people can become better lawyers, more professional, mature and confident. It's a chance to do a different kind of legal work, while improving people's lives and giving a boost to our partner organizations. Our secondees return to the Firm re-energized and bring back valuable skills that are relevant to their commercial work. They also gain a new subject-matter expertise that helps them lead future pro bono projects."

