

Global Pro Bono Guide 2026

Pro Bono Practices and Opportunities in Switzerland

Introduction

Switzerland is a confederation comprising 26 cantons and half-cantons. It operates under a three-tiered governmental structure: the Confederation (federal level), the cantons (state level), and the municipalities (local level).¹ In the country, the provision of pro bono legal services, defined as voluntary and unpaid legal assistance, is relatively limited compared to other jurisdictions.² This is primarily due to the country's comprehensive and mandatory government legal aid scheme, which requires most lawyers to regularly provide legal representation at reduced fees. As a result, lawyers may feel less inclined to take on additional pro bono work. However, in recent years, a few pro bono clearinghouses and centralised organisations have started to emerge, promoting and facilitating such voluntary services.

At a glance

Minimum pro bono hours requirement for lawyers?	Specific pro bono licence required?	May foreign lawyers practice pro bono?	Insurance required for law firm pro bono?	Insurance required for in-house pro bono?	Rules to limit advertising pro bono work?	Does pro bono work count to CLE credit?	Limitations for in-house lawyers to do pro bono?
No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

The landscape

Professional regulation	
<p>1. Describe the laws or rules that regulate the provision of legal services, including any licensing required to provide legal services. Please highlight any differences for lawyers working as in-house counsel.</p>	<p>In Switzerland, the provision of legal services, in particular legal representation before judicial authorities, is governed at both federal and cantonal levels, reflecting the country's federal structure and the existence of a lawyers' monopoly on such activities.</p> <p>At the federal level, the primary legislation governing the legal profession is the Federal Act on the Free Movement of Lawyers of 23 June 2000 (FMLA).³ This act addresses various aspects of the profession, including inter-</p>

¹ 'Operation and organisation of Switzerland', available at <https://www.ch.ch/en/political-system/operation-and-organisation-of-switzerland/federalism/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

² https://www.trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-TrustLaw-Index-of-Pro-Bono.pdf?utm_ (Last viewed on 16 February 2026).

³ Federal Act on the Free Movement of Lawyers of 23 June 2000 (Switzerland), available at <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2002/153/en> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

cantonal freedom of movement, cantonal registers, and the federal rules of professional conduct. The Swiss Bar Association (SAV), acting as the federal bar association, plays a key role in coordinating the regulation of continuous education and representing the profession at the federal government level. At the cantonal level, the SAV is supported by 24 cantonal bar associations,⁴ each with the authority to regulate the conduct of lawyers practising within their respective cantons, provided the lawyers are members of the relevant cantonal bar association. Although membership in the SAV⁵ or in these cantonal associations is not mandatory, most lawyers choose to join. Every lawyer who is a member of a cantonal bar association is automatically a member of the SAV.

The standard local qualifications to practise law generally include completing recognised legal studies, serving an apprenticeship of at least one year (the duration may vary between cantons), and passing the bar examination.⁶ Lawyers planning to practise in Switzerland must register in the cantonal lawyers' register of the canton where their office is situated. This application requires submitting their Swiss bar exam certificate (Article 7 FMLA) and meeting the local standard qualifications, as well as providing evidence that they satisfy certain personal criteria. According to Article 8 FMLA, these personal criteria include having the ability to exercise civil rights, the absence of a criminal record incompatible with the profession, the absence of an act of bankruptcy, and the ability to practice independently.

The requirement to practice independently is interpreted strictly. This involves practising either as a self-employed professional or as the employee of other lawyers registered in a cantonal register. It is important to note that, for

⁴ Articles of Association of the Swiss Bar Association, Art. 6, available in French (no English version available) at https://www.sav-fsa.ch/documents/672183/2058067/Status_FSA_2019-06-14.pdf/298f920a-a590-6d47-8221-34ffa601d3c0?t=1644584569279 (last visited on 10 February 2025).

⁵ More information about the membership available at <https://www.sav-fsa.ch/en/mitgliedschaft> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

⁶ FMLA, Art. 4 and 7, available at <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2002/153/en> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

	<p>this reason, in-house counsels⁷ do not fulfil the conditions for registration in the cantonal register as attorneys and are thus not entitled to represent individuals and entities before judicial authorities.</p>
<h2>Regulatory landscape for pro bono</h2>	
<p>2. Describe the laws or rules that regulate the provision of pro bono legal services.</p>	<p>In Switzerland, the provision of pro bono legal services, defined as voluntary and unpaid legal assistance,⁸ is not explicitly regulated by specific rules. The government's legal aid scheme provides free legal representation in court, which some consider to be a form of "pro bono" work. Therefore, this section outlines the regulations governing the provision of these services.</p> <p>The Swiss Constitution mandates the right to free legal representation for indigents, which is only granted when necessary to safeguard the applicant's rights.⁹ Qualified Swiss lawyers registered under a cantonal attorneys' register are, as a rule, obligated to accept court-assigned defence appointments and mandates of judiciary assistance in their canton, but this requirement does not apply to foreign lawyers.¹⁰ When a party is granted legal aid¹¹, the court appoints a lawyer and compensates them at a reduced rate, usually around CHF 200 per hour, with the court retaining the authority to adjust the number of hours claimed. If the party later acquires sufficient financial means, the court may seek to recover the costs, including both court fees and the attorney fees it initially covered. In practice, mandatory participation in the government legal aid scheme has the effect of diminishing voluntary pro bono work that law firms accept. There are no formal definitions or guidelines for pro bono services from the SAV or cantonal bar</p>

⁷ Under Swiss law, in-house counsel are understood as the legal associates providing legal services to the company employing them ("Message relatif à la modification du code de procédure civile suisse (Amélioration de la praticabilité et de l'application du droit)" dated 26 February 2020 (available at: <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/fga/2020/653/fr> (last visited on 10 February 2025))).

⁸ Peter Henry, Les Avocats et la Philanthropie, *Revue de l'avocat* 2018, p. 83, with further references, available at <https://www.sav-fsa.ch/documents/672183/2070367/05arv0218.pdf/0ec7cc28-0998-830c-0227-2ee3e43baaf0?t=1645174938413> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

⁹ Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999 (Switzerland), Art. 29(3), available at <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/404/en> (last visited on 16 January 2025).

¹⁰ FMLA, Art. 25.

¹¹ Swiss Civil Procedure Code of 19 December 2008 (Switzerland), Art 117, available at <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2010/262/fr> (last visited on 10 February 2025), and Swiss Criminal Procedure Code of 5 October 2007, Art 136, available at <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2010/267/fr> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

	<p>associations. Instead, law firms and corporations may establish their own internal guidelines for such services. Overall, these voluntary services are subject to the same rules as paid legal work. Of note, Swiss lawyers are not required or encouraged to perform voluntary pro bono as part of their bar registration or any ongoing training requirements.</p>
<p>3. Do lawyers need a license to provide pro bono legal services (beyond usual local qualification to practice law)?</p>	<p>Swiss lawyers generally do not need a special licence to provide pro bono legal services beyond the usual local qualification to practice law described in the answer II(a)(1). However, access to specific pro bono opportunities may have additional credential requirements. For instance, participation in the Geneva Bar Association's Human Rights Pro Bono Platform is restricted to members of the Geneva Bar Association.</p>
<p>4. Do foreign-qualified lawyers need any additional license to provide pro bono services (beyond their foreign qualification to practice law)?</p>	<p>Lawyers from the European Union (EU) or European Free Trade Association (EFTA) member states can practise as lawyers on a strictly temporary basis without the need to be registered with the relevant cantonal lawyers' register. A regular practice requires registration with a public list of foreign EU/EFTA lawyers maintained by the relevant cantonal supervisory authority for lawyers.</p> <p>In specific cases (e.g., where there is a mandatory requirement to be represented by a lawyer in judiciary proceedings), lawyers from EU/EFTA must act in cooperation with a lawyer registered in the cantonal register (i.e., a lawyer holding the Swiss bar examination certificate (see also question 1 above)). Lawyers from EU/EFTA remain, as a rule, subject to the same professional rules and professional confidentiality requirements as Swiss lawyers.</p> <p>For other cases and subject to the above, EU/EFTA lawyers are not required to obtain additional licences to provide pro bono legal services in Switzerland. However, they may not be eligible for specific pro bono opportunities. For example, they cannot join the Geneva Bar Association's Human Rights Pro Bono Platform clearinghouse unless they are registered with the</p>

	<p>cantonal bar association.</p> <p>Foreign lawyers from outside of the EU/EFTA do not have access to the Swiss legal market as regards representation before judicial authorities.</p>
5. Are lawyers required by such rules to work a minimum number of pro bono hours? If so, how many?	Lawyers in Switzerland do not have a mandatory requirement to complete a minimum number of pro bono hours.
6. Are aspiring lawyers required to complete a minimum number of hours of pro bono legal services to become licensed lawyers?	Aspiring lawyers are not required to complete a minimum number of hours of pro bono legal services as a condition for obtaining their licence. This is not part of the professional requirements of Article 7 FMLA.
7. Aside from mandatory targets (if any), are there aspirational pro bono hours targets for lawyers set by the local bar association, regulatory body or other body?	While there are no mandatory pro bono hours required for lawyers, many law firms voluntarily engage in pro bono work to enhance their reputation and corporate social responsibility standing. Additionally, pro bono services provide lawyers with the opportunity to develop skills and expertise in areas that may not form part of their core practice. ¹² Although these hours are not compulsory, they can contribute to fostering a culture of service and professional development.
8. Do lawyers receive any “Continuing Legal Education” (CLE) or equivalent credit for pro bono hours worked?	No, there are no CLE requirements, as indicated in the response to II(b)(2).
Insurance and advertising	
<p>9. Do lawyers need professional indemnity legal insurance cover for pro bono legal services they provide? Does the requirement differ for in-house lawyers?</p> <p>If insurance is required, can lawyers meet the requirement by working under the cover of another pro bono provider, e.g. in partnership with a private law firm or organization working on the same pro bono project?</p>	<p>Lawyers practising in Switzerland, whether Swiss-qualified or foreign, and registered in the cantonal attorneys’ register are required to have mandatory indemnity legal insurance that corresponds to the type and extent of risks associated with their professional activities.¹³ This insurance coverage extends to both pro bono work and government legal aid assignments, with no specific additional provisions for these types of services.</p>

¹² Andreas Wehowsky, Urs Hoffmann-Nowotny, The role of pro bono work within the Swiss legal system in promoting and strengthening the rule of law in underserved communities (2023), available at <https://www.ibanet.org/pro-bono-Switzerland> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

¹³ FMLA, Art. 12 f.

<p>10. Are there any rules that limit or prohibit advertising of pro bono successes or soliciting new pro bono clients?</p>	<p>In Switzerland, the advertising of legal services, including pro bono successes or soliciting new pro bono clients, is subject to strict conditions. Most notably, “advertising” must be limited to stating objective facts and must correspond to the public need for information, as stated in Article 12 let. d FMLA. Advertising the names of individual pro bono clients without their prior approval or consent would violate professional confidentiality obligations. Therefore, while there are no specific rules that prohibit advertising pro bono successes or soliciting new pro bono clients, such advertising must adhere to the general principles of objectivity and public need for information and must not breach client confidentiality.</p>
Pro bono practice and culture	
<p>11. What are the main areas of law which require or present opportunities for pro bono? What are the major unmet legal needs?</p>	<p>Given the limited culture of pro bono legal services in Switzerland outside the established legal aid scheme (see response to II.(b)(1)), identifying areas of significant unmet legal needs can be challenging. However, with the legal aid framework, unmet needs may be particularly evident in the provision of legal advice outside of court proceedings, as opposed to legal representation in court. Pro bono clearinghouses, such as the Geneva Bar Association’s Human Rights Pro Bono Platform, often have specific focuses, like matching lawyers with the opportunities from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that specialise in human rights issues. Specific NGO committees also often partner with law firms to meet such need, especially when focusing on vulnerable populations.</p>
<p>12. Who are the main providers of pro bono legal services?</p>	<p>The main providers of pro bono legal services in Switzerland are a limited number of private local and international law firms, though many do not advertise their local pro bono activities.</p> <p>Large firms often have significant pro bono culture. Pestalozzi, a law firm based in Zurich and Geneva, for instance, advertises being a part of LexMundi’s Pro Bono Foundation, which is</p>

	<p>committed to global pro bono legal services.¹⁴ CMS, another law firm based in Zurich and Geneva, notes its assistance to various NGOs on a pro bono basis, demonstrating its support for non-profit organisations and the public good.¹⁵ Lenz & Staehelin is regularly involved in initiatives such as supporting human rights organisations (such as Caritas, a Catholic organisation that aims to end poverty, promote justice, and restore dignity) or non-profit and cultural associations.¹⁶</p> <p>Additionally, some Swiss lawyers may serve on non-profit boards without receiving payment, contributing their expertise and leadership to enhance the governance and effectiveness of these organisations.¹⁷ While pro bono legal services in Switzerland are not as widespread as in some other countries, the efforts of these leading law firms and individual lawyers play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable individuals and organisations and promoting access to justice.</p>
<p>13. Are there any noteworthy examples of how innovative technology or artificial intelligence is being used to enable access to pro bono or otherwise as part of pro bono cases or matters?</p>	<p>Technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are used in Switzerland to enhance access to pro bono legal services. A few examples are outlined below.</p> <p>The Geneva Bar Association has developed a Pro Bono Platform, which uses technology to streamline the process of connecting legal entities, such as NGOs, foundations, and associations, that are active in the field of human rights and have ties to French-speaking Switzerland, with lawyers who are members of the Geneva Bar Association and are willing to offer them pro bono legal support in their areas of expertise.¹⁸</p> <p>Swiss law firms, including those providing pro bono services, may rely on their information technology to assist with pro bono matters as</p>

¹⁴ Lex Mundi Pro Bono Foundation ‘Pestalozzi – Switzerland’ <https://www.lexmundi.com/member-firms/our-member-firms/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

¹⁵ CMS ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ <https://cms.law/en/che/about-us/responsible-business/our-involvement-in-switzerland> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

¹⁶ Lenz & Staehelin ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ <https://www.lenzstaehelin.com/our-approach-to-social-responsibility/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

¹⁷ Vischer, ‘Pro Bono’ <https://www.vischer.com/en/team/pro-bono-work/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

¹⁸ See <https://odage.ch/fr/permanences-plateforme-probono> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

	<p>they would with any other billable task.¹⁹</p> <p>Technology has also enabled the development of online reporting tools. For instance, the Swiss Foundation against Racism and Antisemitism has created a reporting tool that provides direct links to the reporting centres of companies, social media platforms, and media outlets. This tool has expedited the reporting process, saving valuable time for victims.²⁰</p> <p>Finally, the Global Pro Bono Hub is a worldwide platform that uses a centralised database to share resources among pro bono lawyers and organisations.²¹</p>
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Sources of Pro Bono Opportunities and Key Contacts

<p>14. Describe notable sources of pro bono matters or resources in your jurisdiction.</p>	<p>In Switzerland, while the government legal aid scheme can be viewed as the primary governmental source of pro bono opportunities, several notable non-governmental organisations and platforms also provide access to pro bono work. These include for instance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geneva Bar Association’s Human Rights Pro Bono Platform: A pro bono clearinghouse operated by the Geneva Bar Association, which connects human rights NGOs with suitable lawyers.²² • TrustLaw: Thomson Reuters Foundation’s global pro bono legal program that links law firms and corporate legal teams with high-impact NGOs and social enterprises working on social and environmental issues.²³ • Swiss Refugee Council: Provides free legal advice to asylum seekers, either directly or by forwarding their queries to the appropriate authorities.²⁴ • International Bridges to Justice: An independent, non-profit NGO headquartered in Geneva, dedicated to
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¹⁹ Benoît Merkt, Lenz & Staehelin: Balancing tradition and innovation, available at <https://www.lenzstaehelin.com/careers/lenz-staehelin-stories/stories-detail/benoit-merkt-talks-change-in-junes-edition-of-mag/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²⁰ See <https://www.gra.ch/fr/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²¹ See <https://www.globalprobonohub.com/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²² See <https://odage.ch/fr/permanences-plateforme-probono> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²³ See <https://www.trust.org/trustlaw/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²⁴ See <https://www.refugeecouncil.ch/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

	<p>protecting due process and ensuring fair trials for accused persons worldwide.²⁵</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Juris Conseil Junior: A non-profit association in Geneva that provides free and confidential legal advice to minors and young adults, as well as their families and professionals working with them.²⁶ • AsyLex: A non-profit association that supports asylum seekers by offering free legal advice and templates for asylum interviews.²⁷ <p>These organisations and platforms play a crucial role in ensuring access to justice for various vulnerable groups and individuals in Switzerland.</p>
<p>15. Is there any public or private organization with which a local or foreign lawyer can register to be made aware of pro bono opportunities?</p>	<p>Local and foreign lawyers can register with the following organisations or platforms to learn about pro bono opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Geneva Bar Association’s Human Rights Pro Bono Platform: For further details, refer to the response in II(e)(1). Members of the Geneva Bar Association can apply to be matched with pro bono opportunities.²⁸ 2. TrustLaw: For more information, see the response in II(e)(1). Individuals, law firms, or in-house legal teams can apply to become TrustLaw members to access pro bono opportunities.²⁹
<p>16. Are there any awards, lists or rankings related to pro bono work?</p>	<p>As explained, pro bono activities are generally treated as any other legal service by law firms, conducted by the relevant subject-matter specialists rather than coordinated or organised by dedicated pro bono lawyers in Switzerland; therefore, there is no Swiss list or ranking of activities of this type. However, awards distributed globally in this field can be consulted on the Global Pro Bono Hub website³⁰ or on the Lex Mundi website.³¹</p>

²⁵ See <https://www.ibj.org/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²⁶ See <https://jci.ch/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²⁷ See <https://www.asylex.ch/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²⁸ See <https://odage.ch/fr/permanences-plateforme-probono> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

²⁹ See <https://www.trust.org/trustlaw/> (last visited on 10 February 2025).

³⁰ See <https://www.globalprobonohub.com/> (last visited on February 10, 2025).

³¹ See <https://www.lexmundi.com/lex-mundi/about/> (last visited on February 10, 2025).

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Learn more

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