

Local Bar Associations Provide Opportunities for Pro Bono Service



ON APRIL 27, 2010, the Virginia Bar Association hosted the First Chief Justice's Pro Bono Summit. This summit, which was attended by many lawyers from around the commonwealth, was the result of the Chief Justice's call to the bar to improve the provision of pro bono services to the public. The program featured reports about pro bono efforts in the state. Reports were given by legal aid officers and lawyers in private practice from Richmond, Roanoke/Shenandoah Valley, Southwest, Hampton Roads, Danville, and Northern and Central Virginia. The reports highlighted the critical role local bar associations play in facilitating pro bono services.

It was noted during the summit that busy lawyers usually just need to be asked to provide pro bono service. Local bar associations ask lawyers to provide pro bono service, and match talented lawyers with the needs of clients who cannot afford to pay. Local bar associations provide structure for pro bono projects in the areas of divorce, wills, and protective orders. The clients deserve access to the judicial system. Local bar associations provide a means for Virginia lawyers to fulfill their ethical obligation under Rules of Professional Conduct 6.1(a) to provide at least 2 percent per year of their time for pro bono work.

There is a critical need for pro bono service that local bar associations are instrumental in filling. According to studies presented at the summit¹, there is a consistent unmet need for legal services for approximately 80 percent of low-income Virginians. The studies further show that, while the overall population per Virginia attorney is 283,

the poverty population per Virginia legal aid attorney is 5,212. The studies also show that Federal Legal Services Corporation funding has declined steadily since the early 1980s. Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts revenue (a primary source of funding for legal aid) has declined from a high of \$4.6 million in 2007 to a projected \$600,000 for the fiscal ending June 30, 2010. Only about 3 percent of Virginia attorneys participated in legal-aid-related pro bono work in fiscal 2009, according to the studies. Through their pro bono programs, local bar associations provide an important alternative to legal aid for addressing the great unmet need for pro bono assistance to Virginia's poor.

Providing legal services to the poor is not just a matter of political correctness. By providing a mechanism for pro bono service, local bar associations make substantial contributions to the fair administration of justice. The studies presented at the summit also showed what we all know empirically: that a poor litigant is more than twice as likely to lose a case if he or she is not represented. Local bar association pro bono programs, therefore, better the odds for poor litigants. In so doing, the local bar association programs also promote confidence that Virginia's judicial system serves the poor and wealthy alike.

If your local bar association has implemented pro bono programs, I urge you to get involved. If your local bar association has not implemented pro bono programs, please consider developing them. The Conference of Local Bar Associations (CLBA) can help. It can direct your local bar associ-

ation to materials about proven, successful pro bono programs that can be tailored to your community.

The subject of resources and programs for local bar associations is but one of the topics that will be addressed at an upcoming Bar Leaders Institute sponsored by the CLBA. Other topics include how to lead your bar association during a bad economy, communicating with members of the bar through social media, involving judges in the bar, and the basics of local bar leadership. The keynote speaker will be Judge G. Steven Agee of the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Continuing legal education credit will be offered. The Bar Leaders Institute will be on October 22, 2010, at the Roanoke Higher Education Center. Details will be posted at www.vsb.org. Mark your calendars. I look forward to seeing you there.

This is my last article as chair of the conference. It has been a good and productive year for the CLBA. I have enjoyed my service immensely. As of June 18, your new chair is Nancy M. Reed. Nancy has served well on the CLBA Executive Committee for many years and has the experience and skills to do a fantastic job.

Endnote:

- 1 J.E. Whitfield, Executive Director, Blue Ridge Legal Services, *Materials Documenting the Compelling Need for Increased Pro Bono Assistance in Virginia*. (VBA Pro Bono Summit 2010)