

Goals Include Pro Bono Service



Patricia A. Barton, 2003–2004 Senior Lawyers Conference Chair

The Senior Lawyers Conference has a lot in common with AARP—when you reach a certain age, in this case 55, you become a member. The SLC has nearly 9,000 members.

The Virginia State Bar Council voted at the annual meeting in June to include SLC's chair on its executive committee, making its total eleven members.

This year was an amazing election year for women: Jeannie Dahnk of Fredericksburg is the president; I am the chair of SLC; Kathleen M. Uston of Fredericksburg is the president of the Young Lawyers Conference; and Judith L. Rosenblatt of Virginia Beach is chair of the Conference of Local Bars. Outgoing Bar President Ben DiMuro termed this the "Year of the Woman" in his remarks to several groups at the annual meeting.

The Senior Lawyers Conference has promoted professionalism and civility among practitioners for several years. Our profession has many severe stresses inherent in daily practice—from negotiating settlements between warring parties, to taking cases to trial that would have benefitted by being amicably-settled. Lack of civility between attorneys adds unnecessary stress and diminishes our profession's image with our clients and the public.

We have added another goal this year: to facilitate the utilization of senior lawyers' skills and experience to benefit the profession and the public. We are working on a proposed amendment to the rules of the Supreme Court of Virginia that will allow attorneys who have retired to provide pro bono legal services to the indigent as emeritus members of the bar through their local legal assistance programs. In this current period of financial cuts in funding for programs serving the poor, we feel this could help fill the need for legal assistance with experienced attorneys.

The attorneys would be covered by the legal aid group's malpractice insurance.

We are also working on an update of our *Senior Citizens Handbook*, the most requested VSB publication by the public. It is published in conjunction with the Young Lawyers Conference, which works with us in developing and updating the handbook.

We have endeavored to remedy the problem of sole practitioners who become disabled or die without having made any provisions for winding up their practices. The bar has had to step in on many occasions with receivers or other assistance (such as a computer expert to help obtain access to a computer when no password could be found)—to the tune of many thousands of dollars.

A special power of attorney can be downloaded from the VSB Web site at www.vsb.org/slc/attorney/dspoa.pdf. It affords a colleague the right to wind up a sole practitioner's practice. We are now working on fine-tuning this procedure in response to questions regarding client confidentiality and protection for the volunteer attorney from malpractice claims that might be brought by the deceased or disabled attorney's clients.

The conference board has appointed a task force to gather information regarding the treatment of individuals who are facing commitment hearings or who are defendants in court actions, to have them declared legally incompetent. We will examine policies of police, psychiatrists, mental hospitals and courts to determine whether persons facing such actions are treated with regard to their dignity, safety and humanity.

The board envisions a busy and interesting year ahead! ☺