

President's Message

by Doris Henderson Causey



Step Forward

I AM HONORED AND HUMBLLED to serve as the 79th president of the Virginia State Bar. In taking the oath of office, I am proud to be the first African American and first legal aid attorney to serve as president. The 79th Annual Meeting was truly History in the Making — I hope to see many more of you at the 80th Annual Meeting next year. Since 1938, the bar has continued to evolve and succeed in discovering new ways to uphold our mission while promoting access to justice to all Virginians. I truly believe that the Virginia State Bar is one of the most exemplary mandatory bars in the nation.

To Past-presidents Michael Robinson and Ed Weiner, I thank you both for your encouragement, guidance, and vision. I applaud your continued contributions, commitment to the mission of the bar, and time in serving the bar and the commonwealth. I am truly grateful for the service, commitment, guidance, wisdom, and contributions of all the past presidents with whom I have worked. And I look forward to working with President-elect Len Heath.

I must thank the bar staff for their incredible hard work, energy, and commitment to over 50,000 attorneys and the various conferences, sections, and committees. They are the foundation of the Virginia State Bar, the often invisible engine that keeps us going. I am grateful for our strong and committed executive director, Karen Gould. Sadly, this year we are losing three wonderful staff members, Joy Harvey, Elizabeth “Bet” Keller, and Barbara Lanier. They have each spent years of their lives devoted to the bar and we wish them the best in their re-

tirement. I have enjoyed learning from them.

Our local and specialty bars are among the best things under the VSB umbrella, and I must single out the Old Dominion Bar Association (ODBA) as one example for all the things it has done for me. As a young lawyer, I was awed by the plethora of knowledge, resources, encouragement, and its family-like atmosphere. The ODBA helped me find my place in the Virginia legal community, and I encourage all young lawyers to seek out a local bar and become active in it. I thank all the members for your support and encouragement.

After seventy-seven years of being Virginia’s advocates for equal justice, the ODBA has achieved one of the organization’s missions — of being more involved with the Virginia State Bar. As a member of the ODBA, I am proud to serve as president of the Virginia State Bar. Thank you for teaching me Virginia’s African American legal history, introducing me to Mr. Oliver Hill, and supporting me with the largest number of ODBA members at any VSB Annual Meeting banquet. It is truly because of your words, actions, and encouragement that I have been able to prepare for and serve in this office. I continue to encourage everyone to be more active in the bar — it is your professional organization, and it should reflect our evolving profession as it carries out the mission mandated by the Supreme Court of Virginia.

During my tenure I seek to emphasize the following:

1. More volunteers of diverse backgrounds involved on every level of the bar and within smaller bars;

2. Pro bono reporting and decreasing the access to justice gap;
3. Advancing the availability of legal services provided to all;
4. Improving the quality of legal services provided to all; and
5. Increasing member participation with Virginia.freelegalanswers.org to at least 10 percent.

I hope to see more volunteers of diverse backgrounds involved in the VSB, as well as smaller bars throughout the state. As you know, the bar is based on a volunteerism system and volunteers are always needed and welcomed. Thus, I encourage you to volunteer to serve on a committee, run for bar counsel, participate on a CLE, make nominations, etc. We all should be informed by diverse perspectives. It enhances the limitless possibilities of our mission and membership.

Legal Aid provides legal assistance to low-income client communities. We are truly in desperate need given the most recent events. There are over one million Virginians who qualify for legal aid assistance. Yet, there are only approximately 135 attorneys to serve them. Legal aid offices throughout the state need volunteers and donors to help meet the needs of our poor and underserved. Please consider sharing your time and expertise with those who cannot afford a lawyer. I think you will find that the rewards far exceed the loss of some of your free time.

I would like to see the access to justice gap decrease. How can we measure this? How do we know exactly the need that is being met? We need data. As a mathematics major, I know that numbers are the basis for addressing and serving the need. We need numbers. We need pro bono reporting

for all 50,000 members. This will help to assess the length of the gap, what we can do to decrease it, and analyze the data for areas of need. I welcome your input on this issue, and I hope we reach a point where lawyers are providing us with this vital data.

One day there will be a right to an attorney in civil cases, but until then legal aid needs help with those cases of everyday life. Legal aid attorneys must handle home foreclosures, evictions, landlord/tenant disputes, divorce, custody, support, domestic violence/protective orders, unemployment, bankruptcies, writs of *feri facias*, garnishments, and more. The civil dockets are long and tedious, especially if the parties are unrepresented. Pro bono assistance or representation will help all: citizens of Virginia, the clerks, judges, and court personnel. I know the bench will greatly appreciate the much needed assistance, and so will those people you are willing to help.

The VSB's mission is "to regulate the legal profession of Virginia; to advance the availability and quality of legal services provided to the people of Virginia; and to assist in improving the legal profession and the judicial system." I ask that we emphasize: (1) advancing the availability of legal services provided to the people of Virginia and (2) the quality of legal services provided to the people of Virginia.

We must work together to achieve these goals. Increasing funding to legal aid programs throughout the state and increasing pro bono volunteers will help to advance this mission. The VSB and many legal aid programs are collaborating with other programs and attorneys to address some of the immediate need. Currently, out of over 50,000 attorneys, we only have a little over 200 attorneys signed up for the VSB's Virginia. freelegalanswers.org. During my term, I challenge all lawyers to meet a goal of a 10 percent sign up rate. It's free, and

you can participate at any time or from anywhere. Please sign up, and if you are already signed up then encourage others to sign up.

The Annual Meeting was truly History in the Making. I am humbled by your trust, and I zealously look forward to working with each of you during the next year. As many know, I live by the starfish rule (if you can only throw one back in the ocean out of millions, you have still made a difference in the world) and I encourage everyone to make a difference in someone's life, your community, and the legal profession. "Helping one person (community) might not change the whole world, but it could change the world for that one person (community)."

I am extremely proud and honored to serve as the 79th VSB president — the first African American and first legal aid attorney in the history of the VSB to serve as president. I look forward to serving.



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Questions? Contact Karl Doss at doss@vsb.org or (804) 775-0522.

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