

LEGAL AFFAIRS

Bar association members turn up volunteer efforts a notch

72,000 hours of service pledged by attorneys

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With more than 72,000 hours of pro bono and service work pledged for 2006, members of the Cleveland Bar Association are continuing to build on a focus toward community outreach that won the professional group accolades last year.

"Our Commitment to Our Community" is the Cleveland bar's initiative to encourage firms to publicly commit to a certain number of hours and then record actual pro bono and community service time.

Started in 2004 under then-president David Kutik, the program was honored last year by the American Bar Association with the Harrison Tweed Award. The award recognizes efforts to develop or expand programs to increase access for the poor to legal services.

"There is a huge unmet need for legal services in Cleveland. Everyone realizes it's important to get out in the community, but in the daily press of business, sometimes it just doesn't get done," said Mr. Kutik, a partner at Jones Day. "This program, whereby you make a public commitment to do it then get credit for it, gives lawyers an incentive to do something they want to do anyway."

\$6.18M in pro bono work

Mary Groth, director of pro bono and community programs for the bar association, said she expects the actual number of hours donated by attorneys in 2006 to be closer 85,000, which would top the number of hours donated in '05.

In 2005, 2,152 lawyers reported 84,898 hours of pro bono services and other community work, an average of 39.5 hours per attorney. Bar members had initially pledged 71,300 hours for 2005, but delivered more generously than promised.

Of those hours in 2005, 36.4% were direct pro bono legal services. Based on a conservative blended average of \$200 per hour, the bar association estimates that those 30,902 hours of pro bono work represent a \$6.18 million investment in Cleveland by the legal community.

Volunteer attorneys work at clinics and advice sessions, organized in partnership with The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, a nonprofit that provides legal services to the needy. At the clinics, lawyers take on the cases of clients screened and selected by Legal Aid.

Within six months of Mr. Kutik's announcement of the initiative, enough volunteers had signed up to staff 30 clinics and information sessions in 2005. In all, more than 700 attorneys representing more than 30 firms and lawyer groups served more than 1,500 clients whose legal needs would have otherwise gone unmet.

"One woman was waiting to get divorced for two years," remembers Jan Reith, the Schneider, Smeltz, Ranney & LaFond PLL partner who helped establish the Family Law Clinic through Legal Aid. "She was

so appreciative for the people who were volunteering."

Different way of thinking

The bar association's Ms. Groth said she sees a "culture change" in the legal community in regards to community service.

Whereas many firms in the program's first year only participated in advice sessions, more are committing to pro bono clients in the clinics.

"What I am most happy to see is a momentum building within the legal community," Mr. Kutik said. "A lot of firms have kicked it up a

notch to encourage their lawyers to get out there."

Although the number of 2006 volunteer hours are not available, it is clear the initiative has taken root.

More clinics are being offered and free services are more accessible. The clinics are being held at five locations, including in East Cleveland and Maple Heights. Last year, there were just two sites in Cleveland.

Into the classroom

Beyond the clinics, other programs supported by the bar, such as Volun-

teer Lawyers for the Arts and the Homeless Legal Assistance Program, are growing as well. The latter, for example, which served 600 individuals in 2005, has seen an increase in 2006 from eight to 12 drop-in sites and from 20 lawyers involved to 80.

The Cleveland Bar Association's latest initiative, set in motion by newly elected president Hugh McKay of Porter Wright Morris & Arthur, aims to get 500 attorneys to volunteer in public high schools.

The initiative, called The 3Rs, will place volunteers in 10th-grade classes in Cleveland and East Cleveland to

teach civics, offer support in passing the Ohio Graduation Test and provide career counseling. One goal is to increase minority representation among the ranks of attorneys.

More than 400 lawyers already have signed up for the program, and that number is growing.

"The 3Rs program is the embodiment of the letter and spirit of the ("Our Commitment to Our Community") program, and we are delighted to see the groundswell of commitment of sweat equity from the lawyers of Cleveland to The 3Rs," Mr. McKay said. ■

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