

THE WORK

Charity Challenge: Seeking Donations Amid the Downturn

Posted by Ross Todd

McDermott Will & Emery litigation chief Jeffrey Stone says the legal aid community in Chicago is facing a “perfect storm.”

Need for legal services in the community has never been higher: Where three years ago there were 18,000 foreclosures in Cook County, 2008 saw more than 45,000.

At the same time, private donations have fallen off and low federal interest rates have cut revenues available for legal aid programs from legal trust funds.

“The need for legal aid is skyrocketing,” says Stone, “and the sources are increasingly stressed.”

It’s against this backdrop that Stone is chairing a Chicago Bar Foundation initiative to help bridge the funding gap for Chicago’s legal aid community. In March, the CBF—the local bar association’s charitable arm—will launch its third annual “Investing in Justice” campaign. The program taps lawyers and firms in the private bar for donations to help provide legal services to the poor.

The previous two campaigns have raised just under \$2 million for Chicago-land legal aid providers.

What’s the goal this year in light of the private bar’s own fiscal problems?

“It’s very difficult to set a number in an environment like this,” Stone says. “Whether the capacity is out there in the legal community to meet that need is our serious challenge. But other sources are drying up....It’s even more critical this year than it has been the last two years.”

As dire as times are at big law firms, things are every bit as bleak for legal aid lawyers. The New York Times reported last month that low interest rates are cutting into funding for legal programs for the poor across the country, even as federal funding for legal aid programs has held flat.

As a result, people in noncriminal matters are being left without representation just as there’s been a spike in disputes over foreclosures, evictions, and eligibility for unemployment benefits. “Funding for legal aid right now is in crisis mode,” says the Chicago Bar Foundation’s executive director, Bob Glaves.

“It’s really a time for those of us to still do have the means to actually step up.”

The CBF’s original campaign launched after a 2006 Illinois study found that nearly half the state’s legal aid attorneys were planning to leave their jobs over the next few years. The study found the primary reason for legal aid exodus was low pay. In its first two years the campaign has provided grants to help boost legal aid salaries, which in some cases lagged behind government legal positions by as much as 40 percent.

Glaves, for one, is worried about the potential for the tight job market in this economic downturn to cut into some of the improvements in salaries the campaign has been able to fund.

“As a leader at a legal aid program, it would be easy to convince yourself that you don’t have a problem with attrition right now,” Glaves says.

Unfortunately, reality says otherwise.