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ON THE LAW

Lawyers Unite to Help Assure Justice for All;

L.A. Pro Bono Council brings attorneys together with people who need a friend in court but can't afford to pay the legal fees.

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With a growing need for free legal services for the poor, Los Angeles lawyers are trying to create a giant network to encourage more pro bono work by matching volunteer lawyers with the people who need help.

"It's a matter of connecting lawyers with clients who need their services," said Mitchell A. Kamin, executive director of Bet Tzedek Legal Services, which depended on 360 volunteers to serve 10,000 clients last year.

"It's match-making," he added.

The goal of the newly formed Los Angeles Pro Bono Council is to get more law firms committed to providing pro bono services and finding ways for lawyers to fulfill those obligations, whether it is tackling a consumer fraud case from start to finish or offering one-time advice at an evening legal clinic for the homeless, said David Lash, a founding council member and managing counsel of O'Melveny & Myer's public interest and pro bono services in California.

One of the biggest crises facing the state justice system is the increasing number of people who cannot afford lawyers and who therefore try to represent themselves in court.

In recent years, the state court system has responded by establishing self-help centers and specialty clinics to guide self-represented litigants.

Still, "there is a tremendous unmet need of people who need access to first-rate legal services," said James Clark, a founding council member and partner in Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher's Los Angeles office.

The council plans to recruit and refer volunteers to court-based programs in both the state and federal

systems as well as to such nonprofit groups as Public Counsel, which provide millions of dollars worth of free legal services to the poor each year.

"I think there are many willing lawyers," Clark said, "but they are not sure how to help." He said the council would serve as a resource to lawyers who want to volunteer and to local agencies in need of their legal skills.

California Chief Justice Ronald M. George told lawyers last month at a kickoff luncheon for the council that volunteerism "enriches not only those who are helped but also those who provide the services."

"By participating in this new initiative to provide pro bono services in your community, you may have the extraordinary opportunity and privilege of helping an individual challenge a denial of public or private benefits, change child support or alimony payments, deal with a notice of eviction, handle an outstanding medical bill or work through an immigration problem," he said.

"Whatever the underlying issue," he added, "obtaining legal assistance can mean the difference between the successful resolution of a problem and a life-altering loss" for the client.

George said in an interview this week that he hopes the council will entice more senior partners at major law firms to set an example for other lawyers by pitching in to lessen the number of people with legal problems who don't have lawyers.

He pointed to a statewide study that shows each side represents itself in two-thirds of divorce, child custody and other family law cases. The rise in self-represented litigants demonstrates, he said, the need for

more free or low-cost legal services for those who cannot afford or are not willing to pay legal fees.

Pro Bono Council organizers credit George with inspiring their effort.

The chief justice has been instrumental in advocating increased attorney volunteerism statewide and has written letters to lawyers and judges urging their involvement in pro bono activities.

In San Francisco, the local bar association has challenged its member law firms to commit as much as 5% of their billable hours to pro bono work.

Pro Bono Council members want to increase participation by encouraging law firms to look more favorably on the pro bono work of its lawyers, even counting volunteer hours toward their minimum billable hours requirements.

They also want to make it easier for lawyers to give of their time, helping them to quickly find volunteer opportunities that fit with the amount of time they have to give, their interests and skills.

"You can do an adoption in 20 to 25 hours," said Daniel Grunfeld, president and chief executive officer of Public Counsel, a cosponsor of the Adoption Saturdays program at the Los Angeles County Superior Court.

Through that program, Grunfeld's organization has recruited and helped train hundreds of lawyers who don't ordinarily work on family law matters to help foster families complete the paperwork necessary to adopt children already in their care.

Some volunteers enjoy the challenge of taking on the kinds of cases that would probably never cross their desks: a battered wife seeking asylum in the United States, for example, or a landlord-tenant case.

David Martinez, an associate who specializes in commercial litigation in the Century City law office of Robins Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi, has done both.

He also has helped a pregnant woman who was defrauded into buying two cemetery plots that she did not need and represented an elderly man who lost all of his belongings when he was hospitalized and his landlord rented his room.

"He came back from the hospital to find all of his stuff gone and someone else living in his room," Martinez said. The man won a \$5,000 judgment but lost it when he failed to show up for a post-trial hearing. Martinez got the judgment reinstated.

"It's so rewarding to do that kind of work," the lawyer said. "It has such an impact on people's lives. These are people who could never afford to hire lawyers."

Lawyers with less free time can volunteer a few hours a year at one of many clinics offering general legal advice, Grunfeld said. If they want to engage their legal specialties, there are other options: A corporate lawyer can help a nonprofit group establish bylaws. A real estate lawyer can help negotiate a lease.

Lash said evidence shows that people with lawyers do get better results in court. In a study, UCLA law professor Gary Blasi found that none of 150 tenants suing their landlord without a lawyer for wrongful eviction won at trial, Lash said. By contrast, at Bet Tzedek, volunteer lawyers representing tenants in similar kinds of disputes won 90% of the time, he said.

Lash, who ran Bet Tzedek for many years, said he sends out a weekly e-mail list to his colleagues at O'Melveny asking them to take on one of the several cases referred to him from several public interest law groups.

Council founders hope other firms will name pro bono coordinators, like Lash, to lead internal recruitment efforts, respond to nonprofits in search of volunteers and help match volunteer lawyers with needy clients.

"Most people don't have time or don't know who to call," Lash said. "We want to make it easier for people to do. The easier it is, the more people will do it."

CALIFORNIA; Metro; Metro Desk; Part B; Pg. 2

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