

San Diego Lawyers Rally for Reparations Program

By Pat Broderick
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO — Can a onetime payment of \$3,000 make up for the misery suffered by the survivors of the Holocaust?

"It doesn't sound like an enormous amount of money, but for a lot of survivors who live well below the poverty limit, that kind of money can make a huge difference in their quality of life," said **Michael Levinson**, a partner in the San Diego office of **Cooley Godward Kronish**.

Levinson, who serves on the firm's pro bono committee, is working with the local office of **Latham & Watkins** to find and assist those eligible for Germany's newest reparations program. The outreach effort is part of a recent nationwide rollout, following a six-month test run by **Bet Tzedek Legal Services** in Los Angeles.

Those eligible to collect the stipend — considered by the German government a sort-of Social Security payment — must have "volunteered" for jobs in German-controlled ghettos in Europe and Shanghai during World War II, as opposed to having been conscripted into slave labor camps.

The work they did could have involved anything from sweeping the streets to picking up dead bodies, according to **Stanley Levy**, a senior attorney in the Los Angeles law firm of **Manatt, Phelps & Phillips**, who has been overseeing the nationwide rollout.

An earlier version of the program proved to be cumbersome, with 90 percent of the applications being rejected on "super technical grounds," Levy said.

He credits German Chancellor Angela Merkel with creating a more workable program.

But the process still can be challenging, especially for the elderly, Levinson said, which is why legal help is needed.

"Social workers are fabulous at what they do, but when you have a program like this, which is so unusually hyper-technical, you need to get lawyers involved,"

Levinson said.

The local firms, which also include **Heller Ehrman** and **Paul Hastings**, will be coordinating their efforts with the Jewish Family Service office of San Diego. Over the next few weeks, they plan to launch a campaign that will include fliers, newspaper notices and announcements at synagogues and community centers around San Diego.

In its earliest hours, the local effort has generated a lot of enthusiasm.

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Catherine Caouette,
Paul Hastings

"A number of people are eager and willing to get involved in the project," said **Catherine Caouette**, vice chair of Paul Hastings' San Diego pro bono committee. "It's very compelling from a humanitarian standpoint. You are dealing with people who have been waiting a long time to get a little bit of justice. You don't think that the people you pass on the street could be Holocaust survivors, and the idea that there are people within our community who could be helped is very exciting."

The local lawyers are tapping into the experience of their Los Angeles counterparts, courtesy of a training video that is being sent out to participating firms.

"What has worked in L.A. will probably work in San Diego," said **Amos Hartston**, pro bono counsel in the Los Angeles office of Latham & Watkins.

This has involved setting up legal clinics throughout the community, where local lawyers help those eligible fill out the applications.

"It can be a very moving experience," Hartston said. "Any

attorney can do it, whether they are young or a senior partner, or whether they work in litigation or transactional matters."

In addition to San Diego and Los Angeles, the list of participating places so far includes San Francisco and the East Bay, Orange County, New York, New Jersey, Hartford, Conn., Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Miami, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Dallas, Denver, Milwaukee, Omaha, Neb., Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz.

"The list is expanding almost

estimated 130,000 Holocaust survivors in the United States. The German government estimates some 20,000 of those could be eligible for the onetime payment.

"We hope we will reach as many survivors as possible," said Barrett, noting that her agency has realized a 100 percent success rate of the 118 applications that so far have been fully processed. "We have such an amazing team. They have created an airtight process."

The clock is ticking, Levinson said.

"We are going to act expeditiously, and get this done in the next few months," he said. "Our population is getting to the point where many have died from old age. The youngest are in their mid- to late-60s, and more likely are in their 70s and 80s."

Barrett hopes that the local partnerships, such as those now starting in San Diego, will be "the beginning of a new innovative model to deliver key legal services to seniors."

"Survivors have a host of legal needs that are common to many seniors," Barrett said. "This is a way to explore ways to help them."

The reparation program goes beyond the cash payment, said Barrett, who lost family members during the Holocaust.

"It's fascinating to me how little very well-educated people know about the Holocaust," she said. "And, it's an opportunity for us, as attorneys, to step away from our desks and computers, and touch history."