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Opening The Door For Retired Lawyers

New pro bono program planning to launch early next year

By **DOUGLAS S. MALAN**

There's more to the retired life than leisure sports and idle time, especially for attorneys.

That's the message that the Connecticut Bar Association's Pro Bono Committee is spreading as it prepares to unveil the Emeritus Project by early 2009.

The goal is to capitalize on the large population of baby boomer attorneys who are retired, partly retired or close to retirement by encouraging them to get more involved in volunteer opportunities. Attorneys will offer legal assistance to low-income clients through the state's legal services and other agencies affiliated with the CBA's Pro Bono Network.

About 15 agencies are part of the network, including the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, Lawyers Without Borders and the Truancy Intervention Project.

Diane W. Whitney, a partner of Pullman & Comley in Hartford, spearheaded the effort after a casual conversation at a party more than a year ago about the need for more resources for indigent clients. That need has become more pronounced as the state's legal services agencies face drastic funding cuts next year.

Whitney collaborated with Deborah Witkin, deputy director of Connecticut Legal Services, and Peter Arakas, general counsel of Lego Systems Inc., to create the framework for the program.

"I don't know if there's been any attempt to target [retired] lawyers in the past," said Whitney, who is a Greater Hartford Legal Aid board member and serves on the CBA's Pro Bono Committee. "So many baby boomer attorneys are retiring and the profession is losing the benefit of their experience."



Diane Whitney of Pullman & Comley said lawyers who take on pro bono cases will be able to tailor their volunteer work to their interests and backgrounds.

The American Bar Association recently placed an emphasis on getting retired lawyers into the mix, and about 30 states have adopted rules that allow retired lawyers to volunteer even though their licenses are inactive. Some states also are waiving fees and taxes that active lawyers must pay.

Whitney said her group is working to exempt retired Connecticut attorneys from having to pay into the Client Security Fund and also trying to arrange for

discounted or complimentary bar association memberships.

Retired attorneys "are an untapped resource with years of experience," said Ralph Monaco, a New London attorney who chairs the CBA's Pro Bono Committee. "In the past, they haven't been involved [in pro bono] because there hasn't been the framework for them to get involved. Right now, the agencies aren't able to keep up with demand, and we hope we can utilize" retired attorneys.

Suited For All

Attorneys must have at least 10 years' experience before they can participate in the program. Those interested will be able to download an application off the CBA web site or receive one by calling the bar association.

The application will ask about the attorney's volunteer interests and practice area strengths. The CBA will also put the attorneys through a screening process and then match them with appropriate volunteer opportunities. The agencies that the attorneys will assist will offer training and insurance coverage.

Witkin, of Connecticut Legal Services,

said that the main point is to let attorneys know that there's a place for them to contribute no matter their legal background or interests.

"We want to encourage people to sign up and work with us to make this a good experience both for the attorneys and our clients," Witkin said. "We think it's a wonderful program and a great help, because even when we're fully staffed we can't service everyone."

Legal service groups can currently assist only about 25 percent of people who are eligible for those programs, Witkin said. That percentage will likely drop next year as proceeds from Interest on Lawyers Trust Ac-

counts, the primary funding source for the legal aid agencies, drops drastically because of the bad economy.

Projected layoffs will make the retired lawyers' efforts even more important, organizers say. Once involved in a pro bono case—whether in assisting a start-up company or representing a client in marriage dissolution—the rewards can be significant, said Whitney, of Pullman & Comley.

"I represent big corporations in my practice," said Whitney, who practices environmental and land use law. "When I represent a mother in danger of losing her child, it's a whole different level of satisfaction." ■