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PILI committee builds on DuPage's pro bono efforts

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In Cook County, more than 30 legal aid organizations collaborate to cover the legal needs of low-income populations as budgets and workloads allow.

But in locales outside the state's largest county, there's often only one legal aid organization present — either Prairie State Legal Services or the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation. Some don't have brick-and-mortar legal aid offices in each town — for example, Land of Lincoln's office in Champaign covers multiple neighboring central Illinois counties.

One study found that 80 percent of legal problems faced by low-income Illinoisans receive no legal assistance at all.

Since brainstorming the idea 10 years ago, the Public Interest Law Initiative has been partnering with local bar associations and other legal groups to create pro bono committees that cover entire an entire Illinois judicial circuit. Each committee consists of at least one judge and pro bono leaders from local law firms, corporations, bar associations and public interest organizations. It's tasked with identifying local needs and barriers, recruiting attorneys to pro bono opportunities and recognizing local pro bono contributions.

With six committees already up and running downstate, now the effort has reached a collar county for the first time. PILI has partnered with the DuPage County Bar Association to launch the 18th Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee.

The committee's members will align exactly with members of the DuPage bar's Public Information and Education Commission, though the two bodies will operate separately.

Robert Rupp, the DuPage executive director, said the commission's partnership with PILI was "a matter of stars aligning."

The commission was created about two years ago. About a third of its work involves promoting pro bono, Rupp said, and the rest includes creating public and client education materials and planning Law Day events.

"We're hoping that this affiliation with PILI will help us improve access to people, create more avenues for attorneys to do pro bono services and connect them with people with need," said Melissa Piwovar, a paralegal at Donner & Company Law Offices LLC in Wheaton and the chair of both the commission and the 18th Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee.

There were 4,853 cases in DuPage County last year where at least one party represented themselves pro se, according to DuPage County circuit clerk data provided by Piwowar. There were 135 cases where the party was found to be indigent.

As the committee plans events and programs, Piwowar said it's nice to hear from PILI what has worked and hasn't worked in other judicial circuits. If, for example, the 18th Circuit committee decides to host an expungement summit, she knows PILI has already helped coordinate several others.

"Instead of us reinventing wheels, so to speak, they can help us create the program or create the event," Piwowar said.

DuPage County is the first PILI-participating circuit where the local bar association operates a legal aid foundation, which she hopes can offer insight to others around the state.

Rupp said the committee is also the designated organization to coordinate pro bono efforts between Prairie State and the DuPage Legal Assistance Foundation, which handles domestic violence and family law issues.

In addition to connecting key players, PILI will handle printing and other staffing work to support the committees.

For the last five years, PILI Executive Director Michael G. Bergmann said he personally attended every committee meeting across the state, working closely with chairs to present Continuing Legal Education and other events. Last year, he said, he logged 15,000 miles on his odometer traveling to those meetings. PILI now has a program director based in Peoria, traveling to all those meetings will be less intense.

Lawyers in rural areas have more ground to cover, Bergmann said, meaning those who want to do pro bono are not only volunteering their time practicing law but also their time traveling to and from volunteer sites. Additionally, the legal issues are different between rural and urban areas.

Bergmann said some of the judicial circuit committees are recruiting retired or semiretired attorneys who may have more time available for long commutes and are looking at using technology to overcome the distance issue.

Bergmann said the idea came up at a pro bono conference in 2007. Inspired by examples in Florida, Indiana, New Mexico, Maryland and Colorado, where each state's high court required the circuits or districts to have a local committees usually made only of members of the judiciary.

The DuPage County committee is the seventh PILI judicial circuit pro bono committee. Others serve the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 10th, 11th and 14th Judicial Circuits.

Tenth Circuit Associate Judge Lisa Wilson, the chair of the 10th Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee, said her committee's work has been a relief for judges in the court serving Marshall, Peoria, Putnam, Stark and Tazewell Counties. Judges aren't allowed to give legal advice, but they are allowed to direct self-represented litigants toward pro bono organizations or to one of the help desks in the Peoria or Tazewell Courthouses to get some basic legal help.

"I think people feel more empowered," Wilson said. "They feel more confident when they're able to speak to an attorney at the help desk."

Before the 10th Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee was formed, the Peoria County Bar Association already had a committee that worked with Prairie State to enhance pro bono efforts in the county of 187,000 residents — the largest in that circuit. Wilson said the PILI-associated committee expanded that effort into the more rural counties in the 10th Circuit and has also created an annual awards event to encourage pro

bono, hosted CLE training to prepare young lawyers for pro bono, established clinics and created a local pro bono pledge which about 45 firms and lawyers have signed.

Bergmann said he would like to see this kind of pro bono committee throughout the state, but for now PILI has focused on partnerships in judicial circuits where there's already groundwork for pro bono that could use PILI's resources to expand.

"We want to go where we can be useful and we can be helpful and we would contribute positively," he said.

Piwowar said the DuPage bar commission discussed partnering with PILI last spring after the DuPage bar president met with Bergmann. The bar's board of directors approved the committee in March.

The committee will host a forum on pro bono on June 7 to connect attorneys in the community and members of the judiciary and to find out what the legal needs are in the community that it should be designing programs to address.

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