

New *Pro Bono* Opportunity:

M-LINC Program at Marquette Law School Benefits Nonprofits

When Janice M. King Gunn formed the House of Lydia, Inc., a shelter to house battered women and children in Milwaukee County, she quickly realized that she did not have the legal expertise needed to complete the process of setting up the new organization. Gunn was relieved to learn that there was a resource to provide legal assistance specifically to nonprofits. With the support of grants from the Helen Bader Foundation and the Pro Bono Initiative Fund of the State Bar of Wisconsin, Marquette University Law School has established the Milwaukee Legal Initiative for Nonprofit Corporations (M-LINC) to link practicing attorneys and law students with charities in need of legal help.

Gunn contacted M-LINC for assistance with the shelter's paperwork and other legal questions. "It was clear we were in over our heads regarding some important legal issues, and we had no money for an attorney," she reported. "I was able to get an appointment at M-LINC's monthly clinic, and they walked me through the completion of the necessary paperwork. The assistance and information we received from M-LINC were invaluable. It is important to us that we are good stewards of the House of Lydia, Inc., and with the help we received from M-LINC, we are headed in the right direction."

In addition to the monthly clinic that Gunn attended, M-LINC facilitates *pro bono* legal services and referrals for eligible nonprofit corporations, and it also hosts educational programs on pertinent nonprofit legal issues. M-LINC's strategic analysis program aims to employ the expertise of students, faculty, and administrators throughout Marquette University to benefit one area nonprofit each school year.

With assistance from Marquette law students, M-LINC's director, Attorney Karin H. Werner, administers the *pro bono* legal services and referrals program. Werner works to pair eligible nonprofits with volunteer attorneys for free advice on discrete legal issues. To date, M-LINC has assisted a number of area nonprofits with their legal questions, including removing a disruptive and no longer active director, drafting personnel policies, creating proper procedures for the approval of compensation, dissolving a defunct nonprofit, and reviewing real estate contracts.

Likely topics for upcoming educational sessions include legal issues of fundraising and revenue generating activities for nonprofits, employment law for nonprofits, legal issues in managing volunteers and

protections for volunteers, and important new policies that every nonprofit should have.

Finally, Marquette University Law School now offers a specialized course on nonprofit law, co-taught by Werner. Students who participate in the course are better prepared to assist with M-LINC, and they learn skills helpful in serving nonprofits during their future careers. "My interest is in business law, so M-LINC provides the perfect opportunity to apply what we've learned in our classes to the real-world situations facing nonprofit organizations," said Elizabeth Koller, a second-year law student and participant in the program. "We're helping them so that they can continue helping others."

Werner also emphasizes that M-LINC is a great opportunity for transactional attorneys to exercise their legal skills in a *pro bono* project. "M-LINC is particularly looking for employment law, intellectual property, tax, real estate, and corporate lawyers to volunteer their time, as those are the types of legal requests that M-LINC receives."

Nonprofits and potential volunteer attorneys can inquire about *pro bono* legal services by contacting M-LINC at (414) 288-6331, (888) 530-5462, and www.nonprofitlinc.org.

Happy Holidays

from the MBA staff:

Jim, Britt, Katy, Sabrina, Pam,
and Brian



If you are interested in running for the MBA Board or becoming an officer, please contact Jim Temmer at 414-276-5934 or at jtemmer@milwbar.org



men·tor·ing (v.)
Fancy word for hanging out

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Pro Bono Corner

Enter the Milwaukee County Courthouse and you find a hive of briefcase-toting attorneys hurrying to their next court appearances, conferring with their clients, negotiating with their adversaries, or pondering strategy with their colleagues. Go up to the seventh floor, though, where family law cases are handled, and there are few attorneys to be found. While these cases arguably are among the most important in the system – addressing custody and financial support for more than half of Milwaukee’s children – the vast majority of family law cases proceed without a lawyer in the courtroom.

Milwaukee County courts handled about 7,500 pre- and post-judgment non-paternity family law hearings in 2007. Approximately 85% of the parties in those hearings – more than 12,000 litigants – was not represented by an attorney. The courts handled an additional 12,000 or so pre- and post-judgment paternity hearings with virtually no legal representation for more than 20,000 mostly low-income litigants. More than half of these hearings were post-judgment proceedings where the original resolution did not work for the family, and so the parties had come back to court, usually without counsel, seeking help.

It is generally agreed that litigants and the courts are better served when attorneys appear for all parties. The few family law liti-

gants with attorneys are represented by the private family bar, by a handful of staff attorneys at free legal service providers such as Legal Action of Wisconsin and reduced-fee providers such as Centro Legal, and by about 50 attorneys who provide *pro bono* representation through Legal Action’s Volunteer Lawyer Project.

“Legal Action of Wisconsin receives more requests for help with family court cases than any other type of case,” observed Pat Risser, Legal Action’s VLP Coordinator. “The lack of legal representation denies many family court litigants the legal remedies they need from the courts, and it undermines the sense of fair play upon which our legal system is based.” Noting the high stakes involved in family law cases, Risser added that “lacking the knowledge and skills to effectively advocate for oneself in family court is an unjust burden on the person who is unrepresented.” *Pro bono* volunteers can go a long way to address the need in family court.

While many private attorneys fear that *pro bono* work siphons off paying clients in this area more than others, that is simply not true, said Kathy Charlton, a shareholder in Hawks Quindel Ehlke & Perry SC. She practices family and employee-side employment law, and has done *pro bono* family court work through the Volunteer Lawyer Project since 1986. Her *pro bono* clients “wouldn’t

have the resources to hire a lawyer – not even close.”

Attorneys who practice in other areas face a different dilemma – how to get up to speed so they can handle a family law case effectively. “It’s a challenge,” Charlton recognized. But “the VLP does a very good job of giving people the nuts and bolts to handle their VLP [family law] cases.” Charlton urges attorneys who want to get their feet wet before taking on a family law client to consider volunteering with the Milwaukee County Family Law Self-Help Clinic at the courthouse, where lawyer and non-lawyer volunteers offer procedural information and assistance with forms.

A former *pro bono* client of Charlton’s called her recently to express her gratitude, telling Charlton that her work helped the client get her identity back. “That’s about as good as it gets in a professional practice,” said Charlton.

The Volunteer Lawyer Project, Family Law Self-Help Clinic, and many other organizations looking for attorney volunteers are listed in the MBA’s *Pro Bono Opportunities Guide*. You can obtain a copy of the *Guide* at www.milwbar.org, or by contacting Britt Bellinger, (414) 276-5931 or bbellinger@milwbar.org.

Milwaukee Bar Association Mission Statement

Established in 1858, the mission of the Milwaukee Bar Association is to serve the interests of the lawyers, judges and the people of Milwaukee County by working to:

- Promote the professional interests of the local bench and bar;
- Encourage collegiality, public service and professionalism on the part of the lawyers of Southeastern Wisconsin;
- Improve access to justice for those living and working in Milwaukee County;
- Support the courts of Milwaukee County in the administration of justice; **and**
- Increase public awareness of the crucial role that the law plays in the lives of the people of Milwaukee County.

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This exciting new panel offers you the opportunity to have:

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This panel is FREE to join and you will be helping out the large low-income population that is in desperate need of legal assistance.

Pre-set sliding fee scale determined by income and public assistance.

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