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In-House Counsel Reaches Out

Hartford group offers pro bono work for corporate lawyers

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

When a tax lien threatened a nonprofit West Indian dance troupe for Hartford children, the group sought attorney Priya Morganstern's assistance.

Morganstern determined that the lien was wrongfully placed on the organization by the city of Hartford, and she successfully worked to obtain a tax abatement and that kept the troupe from paying several thousand dollars.

"Had the organization had to pay it," Morganstern said, "they would've gone under."

And the fee Morganstern charged for her time? Nothing.

Her legal work is part of the Pro Bono Partnership (PBP), itself a nonprofit that uses corporate attorneys to provide free legal services and educational workshops to community-based nonprofits.

In February, the partnership announced its expansion of services to Hartford and nearby communities by hooking up with the existing Nonprofit Pro Bono Initiative. The PBP helped found the Nonprofit Pro Bono Initiative in 2003, but the latter group had operated as part of the Connecticut Urban Legal Initiative, based on the campus of the University of Connecticut School of Law.

'Muscular Organization'

For Morganstern, who also ran the Nonprofit Pro Bono Initiative, the change means an immediate injection of resources from PBP, which celebrated its 10th anniversary this year. The partnership was started by members of the in-house bar in Westchester and Fairfield counties. It then expanded to New Jersey and now Hartford. Affiliate programs are located in New York



Richard Hobish, second from left and executive director of the Pro Bono Partnership, recently presented General Electric General Counsel Brackett B. Denniston III with the partnership's Extraordinary Service Award. Flanking the two men are PBP Chairman John M. Liftin, left, and PBP President John L. Sander.

City and Atlanta.

"It's fabulous," Morganstern said. "The program is now part of a more muscular organization. The likelihood that the program will be around five, 10 or 15 years from now is greater than it was before."

Morganstern, who is director of PBP's Hartford program and its lone lawyer, now works out of office space provided by Robinson & Cole.

She was concerned that the program would get lost in the shuffle when it relocated, but to the contrary, she has received 25 requests for help in the past two months, which she described as a strong number of applications.

Little will change about the way she does business, except that she's trying even

harder to attract more corporate attorneys in the Hartford area. In-house counsel "might not even know they want to do *pro bono* work," she said, because they're not aware of the various opportunities that don't involve litigation.

PBP offers plenty of those opportunities, said Richard S. Hobish, the partnership's executive director. He started PBP in 1998 as a one-man team and received considerable encouragement from the legal department of Stamford-based General Electric, which currently has about 80 attorneys volunteering in the program.

Pro bono is "a big interest of mine," said GE General Counsel Brackett B. Denniston III. "We first got involved because we were looking for better oppor-

tunities to connect lawyers, especially in Fairfield County, with *pro bono* projects. It's always more challenging for in-house lawyers to get involved as opposed to law firms, where opportunities are more readily available out of the work that they do and programs are more structured."

Breaking Barriers

Encouraging corporate counsel participation means breaking down barriers that might otherwise keep them from volunteer-

handing employment matters to lawyers with experience in that area of law.

The time commitment can also be a concern, but the nature of PBP's work means a volunteer spends maybe 25 hours over a six-month period, Hobish said.

The partnership assists both established nonprofits and start-up nonprofits.

The PBP screens applicants' organizational structure and legal problems and makes sure they are needy enough to warrant *pro bono* help. Sometimes the partner-

about just creating a new nonprofit" without doing their homework, Morganstern said.

Employment law composes about one-third of the matters that PBP handles. Morganstern said "employment is often the Achilles heel for nonprofits" because problems usually arise from employees who are overworked and underpaid.

Other typical matters include corporate governance work, such as reviewing bylaws and the policies that ensure nonprofits remain accountable to the public. The partnership also assists nonprofits with real estate matters, such as reviewing terms of leases for office space.

In all the places where it operates, PBP assists more than 300 clients on approximately 550 matters every year on the strength of more than 400 volunteer attorneys. The partnership aims for about 100 new clients and new volunteers every year.

Funding comes from three primary sources: corporations, law firms and foundations.

But with an in-house staff of just 12, including six lawyers, growth is not meteoric and fundraising and outreach programs are necessary. "To the extent that companies don't know about us, we have more work to do," Hobish said.

Morganstern believes that more in-house lawyers would be receptive to overtures. After all, she said, the daily grind of corporate legal work usually doesn't allow for emotional connections with clients, such as Morganstern's relationship with the Hartford dance troupe.

"Corporate attorneys are hungry to do meaningful work and give back to the community," Morganstern observed. "A lot of corporate attorneys don't know what it's like to have truly grateful clients." ■



Priya Morganstern, director of Pro Bono Partnership's new Hartford program, said she plans to reach out to area corporate counsel to educate them about pro bono opportunities that do not involve litigation.

ing, said Hobish, who is based in White Plains. This includes making projects manageable and funneling matters to attorneys most qualified to handle them, such as

ship turns away applicants who simply don't have their business plan in order.

"You would never open a restaurant on a lark, but some people don't think anything