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Nonprofits profit from Pro Bono Partnership's free advice

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By HOPE SALLEY

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Cash-strapped nonprofit organizations need legal advice in order to make smart business decisions, just like for-profit businesses do. But, nonprofits seldom have the funds to hire an attorney without sacrificing funding for critical services to the community, according to area nonprofit directors.

"People don't realize how important nonprofits are," said Lynne Raymond, executive director of the Girl Scouts of Housatonic Council in Bridgeport. "We have the same issues as (for-profit) corporations. Nonprofits aren't little mom and pop shops anymore."

That is why the Pro Bono Partnership, which has an office in Stamford, as well as in New York and New Jersey, has provided free legal services to nearly 700 nonprofit clients that serve the disadvantaged and cannot afford to hire an attorney to help with routine services like personnel policies and bylaws. The Fairfield County Community Foundation (FCCF) recently recognized the importance of the organization's services by granting it \$5,000 for its efforts to provide free business legal services to county nonprofits.

The Pro Bono Partnership, a nonprofit organization, recruits and supervises more than 800 volunteer lawyers from major corporations and law firms in the tri-state region.

"Nonprofits provide an important safety net for the disadvantaged in our region by developing affordable housing, fostering economic growth in poor neighborhoods, promoting a safe environment, and providing critical social services," said attorney Richard Hobish, executive director. "Most struggle to provide services on very limited budgets and would have to sacrifice program funding to hire an attorney. Without good legal advice, however, a nonprofit risks making mistakes that can damage the organization and its ability to carry out its mission."

Raymond can relate. She said that the Girl Scouts of Housatonic Council have depended on Pro Bono for legal advice for more than five years.

"They have saved us a lot of money. I would say over several thousand a year," she said.

Susan Giglio, director of Families Network of Western Connecticut in Danbury also has benefited from Pro Bono Partnership's services.

"(The organization) matched us with a volunteer attorney who assisted, led us through the incorporation process and filing of tax exempt status. We could not be more satisfied with, or appreciative of, the quality services, the level of attentiveness and responsiveness and the overall expertise of the Pro Bono Partnership attorneys or our match attorney," Giglio said.

Other types of legal advice that nonprofits need include assistance to buy property or buildings, loans or partnership agreements, or resolution of title issues and advice about employment matters, corporate governance, environmental laws, intellectual property, mergers, the internet and e-commerce issues. The list goes on and on.

Volunteers at Pro Bono Partnership said the organization makes volunteering their expertise desirable.

"They make it really easy for people to volunteer," said Toni Nichels, employment law counsel attorney in the general counsel office at Xerox in Stamford. She has been volunteering with the organization since the year 2000.

"My philosophy is that the law is a service profession to benefit an individual or agency," she said. "(The organization) is a fabulous clearinghouse for nonprofits who need help."

Fred Forster started out volunteering as a new lawyer.

"It's a fantastic way to work with live clients," which he said is not that often available as a junior partner.

The Fairfield County Community Foundation has made grants of over \$40 million since its inception and has assets of more than \$53 million in over 200 different funds.

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