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COMMENTARY

Nonprofits Need Pro Bono Legal Help

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The fallout from the longest and steepest downturn and recession since the end of World War II has had obvious effects on our business community and the American worker. Now these negative effects are also reaching to the less-visible nonprofit community, where they threaten to deliver a lingering impact that could extend well beyond the end of the recession.

Nonprofit organizations — already stretched thin by tight budgets and small staffs — have been hammered by increasing demand for their services from growing segments of the public. At the same time they face a dwindling supply of the financial support, services and resources they need to ensure continued support for their underprivileged clients.

Nonprofits are scrambling to plug holes in a system that relies upon outside contributions and pro bono expertise to run efficiently. One indispensable service that they absolutely cannot do without is the pro bono legal assistance that helps them manage the intricacies of our complex legal landscape.

In this challenging climate, it is crucial that corporate law departments and law firms redouble their dedication

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to furnishing free legal aid to nonprofit organizations of all sizes. In fact, pro bono help is now more important than ever.

Pro bono traditionally has been viewed as a service lawyers provide to low-income or needy individuals, but many nonprofit organizations depend upon pro bono legal work each day. Almost every nonprofit organization struggles to assemble the staff and skills needed to adequately prepare and manage their volunteer teams, and even to respond to the influx of volunteer requests — much less handle their own legal affairs.

In recent years, the number of attorneys offering pro bono expertise, as well as the clients and communities they serve, has increased exponentially. For example, from 1995 to 2007, the hours of pro bono service provided to individuals and organizations of limited means increased by 161 percent — from 1,052,806 to 2,756,330 — according to the Pro Bono Institute.

According to the American Bar Association, 73 percent of lawyers provide some level of pro bono assistance to people of limited means or to organizations serving the poor. And this demand for pro bono assistance is poised to escalate.

Our economic troubles have quickly generated an increased call for free legal insight and guidance from organizations that need to reorganize their businesses, adhere to federal and state regulations, and ensure that they are managing finan-

cial matters appropriately.

At the same time, the economic plunge has prompted companies and law firms to take a careful look at how much time and resource they can afford to dedicate to pro bono work. In some cases, this examination of resource allocation has resulted in organizations cutting back on what they consider nonessential services, such as free legal advice and support.

Increasingly, this challenging environment will lead to nonprofit organizations operating without essential professional legal guidance. This can result in costly errors, unexpected mistakes and undesirable consequences.

Now is the time for attorneys to strengthen their commitment to providing pro bono services to nonprofits. In this era of unprecedented uncertainty, it is more important than ever for lawyers to renew their pledge to deliver free legal expertise that will sustain nonprofit organizations. Pro bono is an essential component of every lawyer's professional commitment to the communities they serve, and this includes lawyers who work in Corporate America.

For those who haven't completely committed to testing the pro bono waters, now is the best time to jump right in and get started. To begin, choose a project with a local nonprofit establishment that is a good fit for your personal interests and skills. You can make things easier to manage or more interesting to work on by finding partners or colleagues with which to collaborate. No law firm or corporate legal department is too small

to contribute enormous results — not in times like these.

Although the benefits of increased dedication to pro bono work may not be evident overnight, the time and effort

invested will pay long-term dividends that can ensure the future viability of nonprofit organizations. Lawyers who contribute their skills and talents to nonprofit organizations can make a vital difference for

these nonprofits at a time when their very existence is threatened. This will also make for greater professional satisfaction for the lawyers, and for better prepared and durable nonprofits. ■