

Pro bono with a twist

Legal service provided to non-profits

By Kris W. Scibiorski

It was the new kid on the block when it expanded its then-yearling operations into New Jersey, but today, nearly a decade later, the Pro Bono Partnership is recognized as a major player in providing unique legal services to non-profits on both sides of the Hudson River.



Nancy C. Eberhardt

In fact, just last week several New Jersey in-house legal departments and individual attorneys were recognized at a midtown Manhattan celebration for their contributions to the group's continuing growth.

Unlike many *pro bono* programs in which attorneys accustomed to reviewing contracts or drafting agreements turn up in courtrooms — sometimes for the first time in their career — representing indigent litigants, the focus of the Partnership is to have corporate lawyers contribute in their own specialties.

The Pro Bono Partnership pairs area non-profits such as adoption and foster care agencies, child-care centers, community health organizations, YMCAs, United Ways and other

similar groups with attorneys in such fields as mergers, governance, employment, real estate, intellectual property and tax law.

And the organization “provides small non-profits with access to expert legal advice from some of the top attorneys in their fields,” noted the group's New Jersey director, Nancy C. Eberhardt.

It was after several corporate counsel in New York's Westchester County and Fairfield County, Conn., decided in 1997 to find ways for in-house lawyers to participate in *pro bono* efforts that New Jersey became part of that effort, Eberhardt said.

Spearheaded by lawyers at Morristown's Honeywell International, Newark's Prudential Financial and Kenilworth's Schering-Plough, the New Jersey chapter was formed in 2000.

It was those three companies that were recognized at last week's event, along with Lee A. Braem of Evonik Degussa, a former head of the New Jersey Corporate Counsel Association who received a Volunteer of the Decade award from the group.

1,300 cases

In less than eight years of existence, the group's 495 New Jersey attorney volunteers have advised nearly 500 client organizations on more than 1,300 legal matters, Eberhardt said.

Along with the three founding corporations, other key contributors to the Partnership include Johnson & Johnson, Sony, Merck, Becton-Dickinson and more recently Wyeth.

A relatively new development is the growing involvement by corporate attorneys practicing with area law firms, such as Drinker Biddle & Reath, McCarter & English, and Dechert, Eberhardt added.

She hopes that in the near future, the organization's presence will spread south from its original North Jersey base.

The group's reach “has started to slide southward and now includes Mercer, Monmouth, Middlesex and Ocean counties,” Eberhardt noted.

“We want to become better-known in the southern part of the state and increase awareness of our activities.”

The growth in New Jersey coincides with the overall parent organization's, which recently expanded to include the Hartford area in Connecticut and an offshoot in Atlanta.