



VIRGINIA HOSTS ITS SECOND PRO BONO SUMMIT

On April 24, 2012, the second Chief Justice's Pro Bono Summit was held in Richmond, Va., sponsored by the Virginia Bar Association (VBA). Attended by all of the Virginia Supreme Court justices, the summit convened attorneys from around the Commonwealth and beyond who are interested and involved in utilizing pro bono legal services to address the current chasm in access to justice, including Legal Services Corporation (LSC) President Jim Sandman, PBI President and CEO Esther Lardent, the current and several past presidents of the VBA, members of law firms and legal departments, and representatives from legal services organizations.

After a welcome from the current VBA President Hugh Fain, III, there was a brief overview of the 2010 Summit. Two years ago, the first pro bono summit was called by former Virginia Supreme Court Chief Justice Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., who had a desire to focus attention on the increasing need for legal assistance and the importance of improving and increasing quality pro bono services. Although Chief Justice Hassell has since passed away, his legacy was evident throughout the summit, which featured updates on accomplishments and challenges since the first summit.

Virginia has seen three key accomplishments since the 2010 Summit: a change in the rules that apply to certified in-house counsel providing pro bono, the development of JusticeServer, and the VBA Veterans Initiative. A topic of great interest at the first summit was the unnecessary restrictions Virginia's practice rules imposed on certified in-house counsel providing pro bono. After that summit, lawyers from leading legal departments, the Virginia State Bar, the VBA, and the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) worked together and drafted an amendment removing those restrictions, which was passed in 2011. Now, certified in-house attorneys may and are encouraged to provide pro bono, subject to the same conditions that apply to the services they provide their employer. As a result, the more than 800 certified in-house attorneys in Virginia may provide assistance to needy individuals and organizations. The Hon. Del. Jennifer McClellan spoke about the increase in engagement and new projects for Verizon Communications Inc. that resulted from the change. Others reported on how the revised rule allows other legal departments, such as Capital One Financial Corp., AOL Inc., Exxon Mobil Corporation, as well as the local ACC Chapters, to expand their efforts. In addition, more legal departments are moving to formalize their pro bono efforts in Virginia and more great work is expected as a result.

Developed by the technical staff at Capital One, in conjunction with a task force of representatives from large law firms, the VBA, the Greater Richmond Bar Foundation, Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Inc., and Legal Aid Justice Center, JusticeServer is a new online case-management system that enables attorneys throughout the Commonwealth to assist pro bono clients with matters posted by legal aid organizations. Capital One Executive Vice President, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary John Finneran, along with team members, shared the story of the creation and development of JusticeServer. The system is designed to better link the thousands of clients in need to pro bono counsel located anywhere in the

Commonwealth. It is currently being beta tested and the plan is for a roll out this summer to Richmond programs, then to programs throughout Virginia, followed by the possibility of a national rollout. Once live, Dominion Resources, Inc. will provide technical assistance.

The presentations then turned to the future, including goals and ways to address the obstacles that currently stand in the way of achieving such goals. Among the presenters were representatives from legal services organizations throughout Virginia, who reported that many of the challenges vary from region to region, including increases in poverty, geographic isolation of clients from pro bono attorneys, inactive local bar associations, limited programming, and funding cuts that among other negative impacts have forced reductions in legal services staff. Other goals included the expansion of a program created by the largest law firms in Richmond – Firms in Service – to include attorneys throughout the Commonwealth and a sharing of best practices programs that operate in one area but could be replicated in other areas.

Finally, LSC President Sandman provided a national perspective and commended the Virginia courts and justices for their leadership. He also spoke about the importance of collaboration in addressing access to justice and reminded attendees that access to justice is essential to societal stability.

Immediately after the presentations, attendees participated in a Forever Tree Ceremony in memory of Chief Justice Hassel at the Virginia State Capitol Grounds, followed by a luncheon and panel discussion, featuring speakers Lardent and Virginia's Attorney General Kenneth Cuccinelli, II.

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