Recently, gallons of ink have been spilled in the press chronicling the public's low opinion of lawyers. To change this perception, I cite the words of Benjamin Franklin: "Well done is better than well said." We will never win the war on the public's perception of lawyers with words. We need actions.

One way we can act is to volunteer in the community. Lawyers are generally very giving of their time, talent and treasure. However, we cannot become complacent and rest on the laurels of our past accomplishments.

As President of the CBA, I meet lawyers and community leaders of diverse backgrounds, interests and concerns every day. I have heard from lawyers – young and old – who are interested in doing more volunteer work in the community, but are unsure of the direction that will be most impactful. I have spoken with members of our community about their concerns for the future and the unmet community needs. All this leads me to an opportunity to bolster an existing program and provide a needed service to a segment of our community.

Providing legal services to citizens who cannot afford a lawyer has been the mainstay of the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati and the Volunteer Lawyers for the Poor Foundation. Through a discussion with Foundation Chairman David Olson, I learned about a Divorce Clinic Project initiated by Legal Aid and the Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP), and operated in collaboration with the domestic relations courts in Hamilton, Butler, Warren and Clermont counties. Olson observed that there are many members of our community who need to dissolve their marriages, but cannot do so because they cannot afford a lawyer.

Barbara Howard, president-elect of the Ohio State Bar Association — as well as past president of the CBA, past president of the VLP, continuing member of the VLP Board and a highly regarded family law specialist — echoed Olson's comments about the need for the clinics. She observed that "people who qualify for VLP representation seek assistance in family law matters in far greater numbers than any other area of the law."

How the Divorce Clinic Works

After the VLP identifies a client as eligible for the clinic, the VLP secures a volunteer lawyer to represent clients in a designated Divorce Clinic. Legal Aid provides a paralegal to assist the attorney through the entire process. The clinic paralegal meets with the clients, prepares the paperwork, and schedules the final hearing at a time convenient to the attorney and the Court.

The paralegal then schedules all of the clients to come to the Legal Aid office in Cincinnati on a single day, giving each an opportunity to meet privately with the VLP attorney and to sign the court documents. The entire time needed for the VLP attorney to meet with individual clients in the group is between one and two hours.

When the final hearing date nears, the paralegal obtains the attorney's signature on each decree and handles all pre-hearing matters with the clients and the Court. The hearings for every client in the clinic group are set for the same date. Prior to the VLP attorney's arrival at the hearing, the clinic paralegal reviews the decree and discusses the hearing procedure with each client. The attorney is provided with a "working copy" of each decree for the hearing.
The VLP, which strives to obtain representation in the most difficult cases such as those involving children in contested custody or abuse situations, needs assistance in moving simpler cases forward. Without volunteers on these straightforward cases, there can be a crisis of sorts for all involved—those who are forced to go unrepresented, the Court which is clogged with *pro se* cases, and the long delays in getting cases to resolution because of the clogged dockets.

The Divorce Clinics have taken clients with the most simple cases (no minor children, no property, for example) and helped them obtain a divorce. But because of staffing limitations, many clients are turned away or have to wait months before a spot in a clinic becomes available. Olson proposes that private law firms and attorneys could "adopt" a particular clinic, and handle all aspects of the planning, preparation of documents and representation from the beginning. Under this model, the VLP would refer eligible clinic clients directly to the volunteer attorney or firm. This level of participation would free the Legal Aid staff to assist other Legal Aid clients, and allow an increase in the number of clients who would benefit from the clinics.

All ages and levels of experience are welcome. Volunteers will receive training on all aspects of the representation. If you are interested in working with Legal Aid and the VLP to develop and staff a Domestic Relations Clinic, please contact Olson at (513) 651-6905 or Rhonda King, who will also handle volunteers for the current clinic program, at (513) 362-2826.

Society's opinion of lawyers will not change with episodic pro-lawyer editorials or ad campaigns. Instead, our consistent and sincere commitment to provide voluntary legal services to the segments of our community who are in need will, over time, turn the tide of public opinion.

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Philip J. Schworer is 2008-2009 president of the Cincinnati Bar Association.