

Utah YLD's Formula for Pro Bono Success

By Phillip Long

Do you ever ponder how to create a lasting, effective pro bono project? Do you want to create a project that benefits the community for more than just a few days of the year? Is recruiting attorneys to help a problem for your project? If so, then the Utah Young Lawyers Division (YLD) "Tuesday Night Bar" is a model to study. Utah's YLD, in conjunction with its state bar, has successfully sponsored the "Tuesday Night Bar" pro bono project since 1988. Through careful organization and planning, Utah's YLD has created a project that engages attorneys throughout the Salt Lake City area to serve thousands of citizens.

Background

The Tuesday Night Bar is an in-person consultation program, staffed by volunteer attorneys and designed to provide preliminary counseling and general legal information to underserved populations in the Salt Lake City area. The premise of the program is simple.

"Many citizens have legal problems but are simply afraid of the unfamiliar legal system and of lawyers," explained Christina Micken of Layton, Utah, current Tuesday Night Bar Committee Co-Chair. "The Tuesday Night Bar program puts a face on lawyers and allows a chance for citizens to interact with an attorney, for free, in a brief one-on-one consultation. The simple chance to speak with a lawyer in this setting can help alleviate their fears of the legal process." Sessions are held from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on most Tuesday nights of each month.

Organization Leads to Success

Success is achieved only through the coordination of the YLD and the Utah State Bar. Citizens call a toll-free number (staffed by the Utah Bar Center) to schedule an appointment. Scheduling appointments allows the YLD to control attendance at a manageable size. Participants, who can only visit three times a year, complete an intake form that asks for their background information and about the nature of their legal problem. Limiting appointments prevents the creation of an ongoing attorney-client relationship between a participant and an attorney and ensures that all citizens have access to the program.

While the staff coordinates the appointments, "[t]he YLD committee coordinates attorneys, encouraging local firms to sponsor a team of attorney volunteers who then agree to attend the program a few times a year," says current Tuesday Night Bar Committee Co-Chair Gabriel White, Salt Lake City, Utah. "Each firm appoints a team captain who is responsible for making sure that the weeks that have been allotted to the firm are filled with at least five to six attorneys,"

Through this organization, each two-hour session allows five to six attorneys to work with thirty to thirty-five citizens in brief, one-on-one consultations. After the consultation, participants may be referred to another attorney who has agreed to provide a thirty-minute consultation for \$30.

Steps to Encourage Volunteers

The program's design is purposefully "attractive" to busy attorneys. The program is held year round, which allows attorneys to volunteer at the best time during the ebb and flow of their legal practice. The program is scheduled during evenings from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., after most of the workday is done. Volunteer attorneys have training sessions that focus on the areas typically encountered (bankruptcy, landlord-tenant, debtor-creditor, and family law), which can earn them CLE credit. The state bar also provides malpractice coverage during participation. Finally, the program benefits the attorney too—they get experience in dealing with clients, skills that younger attorneys often lack, while improving the public's opinion of the legal community.

"Simply seeing a lawyer giving free advice shows the public that lawyers do care about their community. We are not the stereotype often portrayed in popular culture," stated current Tuesday Night Bar Committee Co-Chair, Kelly Latimer of Salt Lake City, Utah.

A Lasting Program

The YLD has been able to continue this program for over twenty years because of careful planning. Gabriel White said the program is successful "because it is a very satisfying way for attorneys to give back to the community through a small commitment of time."

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“Only through coordination of the state bar staff with our committee can we mount such a large-scale program. Bar staff handles citizen scheduling, and we handle attorney scheduling. Each year, in conjunction with the staff, we also examine the program to find out how we can better execute it,” Christina Micken concluded.

Such assessment has yielded changes, such as creating a similar “Wednesday Night Bar” focused on the Spanish-speaking population. Through these careful efforts, attorneys serve over 1,200 citizens each year. Utah YLD’s planning is a model for execution of a successful pro bono project that engages both the public and the bar.

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