

Legal Aid Foundation's Associates Campaign Kicks Off March 1

For associates at law firms throughout Colorado, March marks the 17th year of the Legal Aid Foundation's (LAF) Associates Campaign, a month-long friendly fundraising competition. Aptly named — it is both run by associates and driven by associate donations — the Associates Campaign raises money for Colorado Legal Services (CLS), Colorado's only statewide provider of civil legal services for low-income people and vulnerable populations. Last year, 65 firms participated and raised \$228,080 from 1,175 individual donors.

Any account of the Associates Campaign calls for a brief primer on the organizations (and acronyms) at play. LAF is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that was founded in 1981 in response to cuts to federal funding for legal aid. LAF's mission is to promote equal access to justice by raising funds to provide civil legal services for low-income persons in Colorado.

The funds raised by LAF directly support the work of CLS. CLS is the only agency in the state that provides free legal services in civil cases to indigent clients in every Colorado county. To do that, CLS employs 65 attorneys in 13 offices across the state. CLS's clients, with few exceptions, live at or below 125% of the federal poverty guideline, which means an annual income ceiling of about \$15,000 for an individual and \$32,000 for a family of four. Before the pandemic, approximately 800,000 Coloradans met this criteria and were eligible for CLS's services. CLS focuses its limited resources on legal issues that impact basic human needs such as food, shelter, utilities, necessary medical care, adequate income, and freedom from domestic violence and abuse. In 2019, CLS directly served over 25,000 Coloradans and stretched its limited resources with technology, self-help materials and clinics, and state-of-the-art, interactive

online legal forms to help many more. Nevertheless, for every client served, CLS is forced to turn away one income-eligible client because of inadequate resources.

The Associates Campaign began in 2005 as a way to build support for civil legal aid among a new generation of Colorado lawyers interested in supporting access to justice. In that first year, 125 associates from ten Denver firms donated nearly \$9,000. The Associates Campaign has grown each year since to include more donors and more firms and the campaign has become a significant portion of CLS's funding. In 2012, the Associates Advisory Board (AAB) was formed to guide and oversee the Associates Campaign. The AAB comprises associates from participating firms and provides leadership and guidance to firm representatives. The firm representatives, in turn, are tasked with asking others at their firm for donations. Although the focus of the campaign is on

donations from associates, donations from anyone affiliated with a firm — including partners, staff, friends, and family — count towards a firm's fundraising goals.

But of course, this March marks another anniversary. It has been one year since the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in this country and upended, well, everything. The Associates Campaign was no exception. The AAB paused last year's campaign in mid-March and the campaign instead resumed for two weeks in April. Firm representatives modified their fundraising techniques to adapt to a stay-at-home world. In-person requests, presentations, and happy hours were shifted to



phone calls, emails, or Zooms. Despite the disruption, the firm representatives were relentless and donors were generous; the 2020 Associates Campaign quite nearly matched the previous year's total.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of the funds raised by the Associates Campaign. COVID-19 has increased the need for CLS's services, both in terms of the number of people in Colorado who meet CLS's eligibility threshold and in terms of the demand for services among those who do. For example, in 2019, housing issues (including foreclosures, evictions, and landlord/tenant issues) accounted for 37% of CLS's work. The pandemic has only created more housing instability as many struggle to make rent. That same year, family law issues, including domestic violence, accounted for 24% of the services CLS provided, even before stay-at-home orders exacerbated already-tense home situations. Employ-

ment, health, and individual rights made up 18% of CLS's work prior to massive unemployment amidst a public health crisis. And consumer protection issues, such as bankruptcy, debt collection, and small claims, accounted for 16% of CLS's caseload before the pandemic devastated American pocketbooks.

"The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences have significantly increased both the number of clients eligible for our services and the need for high-quality legal information, advice, and representation," explains CLS Executive Director Jon Asher. "Never has the need for our services been greater or more vital to so many people in need with nowhere else to turn."

In a time of uncertainty, one thing is sure: the more money raised by the Associates Campaign, the more eligible people CLS can help. With the leadership of the AAB and the generosity of associates

across the state, this year's Associates Campaign is on track to be another success. The challenge of fundraising during a global pandemic does not discourage this group of young leaders — after all, they've done it before.

If your firm is not already participating, there is still time to sign up for the 2021 Associates Campaign. For more information, please contact Kelly Bossley, Associate Director of the Legal Aid Foundation, at kelly@legalaiddfoundation.org.

ELIZABETH A. OCH is a senior associate at Hogan Lovells US LLP, where she specializes in commercial and environmental litigation. Liz is a member and past co-chair of the Associates Advisory Board and serves as one of her firm's Associates Campaign representatives.

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