Retired & Inhouse Lawyer Pro Bono

Authorization for retired Minnesota lawyers and inhouse counsel to provide pro bono representation to pro bono clients moved a step closer to realization this month as the Minnesota Supreme Court’s deadline passed for comments to be submitted on the petition of the Minnesota State Board of Law Examiners.

The Minnesota State Bar Association was instrumental in the filing of the Law Examiners petition, as well as an earlier petition of the CLE Board, requesting the boards’ cooperation in seeking amendments to their rules to enable expansion of pro bono legal services.

The supreme court in July issued an order calling for public comments on the proposed amendments to the CLE Rules. A subsequent order issued in September called for public comments on the Law Examiners petition with a deadline of November 9.

The combination of increasing demand and reduced funding for civil legal services has given impetus to efforts to expand the potential pool of attorneys willing and able to provide pro bono services. In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission in October announced a new “pro bono fellows program” that will have senior lawyers working with nonprofit and legal service organizations to help underserved populations.

Launch of a Minnesota program will necessarily await supreme court action on the two petitions, but as proposed, the “Emeritus lawyer program” would authorize “inactive-retired” Minnesota lawyers to provide pro bono legal representation to clients in matters referred to the lawyer by an approved legal services provider. The Law Examiners’ petition would impose similar constraints on inhouse counsel admitted under Rule 10 of the Rules for Admission to the Bar. In both instances, care is being taken to provide for verification that the client qualifies for pro bono services and that the lawyer has the necessary skills to represent pro bono clients.

Law Students Serve Veterans

William Mitchell College of Law recently announced the launch of a new Veterans Law Externship program to serve veterans returning to civilian life and the University of Wisconsin Law School established a Veterans Law Center to serve Madison-area veterans and members of the military services.

Mitchell’s program, spearheaded by Prof. David Prince, combines classroom work with practical experience covering issues such as how the law defines a veteran, veterans’ benefits, housing, employment, family law, professional responsibility, and veterans courts. Students are matched with a practicing lawyer and must spend a total of 100 hours in class, doing research, and working with clients to complete the externship.

The program will involve only two students in its “trial run” this semester but Prof. Prince said he’d like to see the program grow to six to eight students per semester who would be supervised by a regular, rotating group of lawyers.

 Volunteer attorneys, paralegals, and law students together will offer services through the Wisconsin Veterans Law Center, according to badgerherald.com. Two attorneys and two law students will be scheduled for each clinic and will work as partners. Among the issues veterans face are foreclosure, divorce, and unemployment as well as others specific to their military service.

Bankruptcy Clinic Combines Training, Service

Since 2010 a unique partnership between the University of St. Thomas Law School and the law firm of Hinshaw & Culbertson in Minneapolis has offered a bankruptcy clinic combining clinical training for students with service to clients needing pro bono legal services.

Attorneys Steve Silton and Tom Wallrich, who also serve as adjunct professors at the law school, spearheaded the effort for their firm in collaboration with professors Joel Nesset and Jamie Pierce. Clients are referred to the clinic through the Volunteer Lawyers Network (VLN).

Students practice under the student practice rules of federal court and under the guidance of local bankruptcy attorneys. Students have appeared in court and in front of the bankruptcy judges, argued motions, defended depositions, participated in settlement negotiations, and counseled clients on the litigation risks. Jury trials in bankruptcy court have taken place as well.