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## Lawyers Journal

### **Fundraisers inc.: Legal services groups turn creative to help bridge funding shortfalls**

By Bill Archambeault

They've tried hiring freezes, layoffs, limiting office hours and plundering their reserve accounts, but it hasn't been enough.

In the midst of an unusually harsh recession, nonprofit legal services groups are caught between the most severe funding shortage anyone can recall and an unprecedented demand for legal help from the poor. There simply isn't enough money, and too many people need help.

So they're trying something new. A number of things, actually.

They're raffling off new cars. Hosting wine tastings. Auctioning off art. Raffling off stocked wine coolers. Even partying it up at Irish pub nights. All in an effort to try and minimize the impact of the massive budget shortfalls they're facing this year and probably next.

#### **Finding new sources of funding**

MetroWest Legal Services, which is based in Framingham and each year represents about 2,500 people in its 36-town area, has been at the forefront of fundraising through events. It's already held an online auction last December and a golf tournament on May 18 in honor of late Executive Director Nancy King that raised nearly \$450,000.

Now MetroWest is raffling off a 2009 Smart Car Passion Coupe, which retails for around \$14,000, on Nov. 12 at another big fundraising event, an "Evening of Wine Tasting and Art."

In all, MetroWest is hoping to raise \$125,000 this year through a variety of events, raffles, auctions and appeals. But even if the group hits that target, it will still be operating at a \$200,000 deficit for the year.

"This year is a whole different ballgame," said MetroWest Executive Director Betsy Soule. "Given the times we're in, we had to think about additional fundraising. We thought, 'Because we've been pretty successful at doing events, what else can we do?'"

Working through a member of its Campaign Committee, MetroWest arranged to buy the car at cost from Herb Chambers, paying for it with the money it raises from selling \$100 raffle tickets. The raffle is a relatively low-risk endeavor because MetroWest will only buy the car if it sells enough tickets.

MetroWest wants to sell a minimum of 350 tickets, but won't sell more than 750. The group has been selling tickets at various town fairs and local events - with the car on display - over the summer, as well as online at its Web site, [www.mwlegal.org](http://www.mwlegal.org). As of Sept. 1, it had sold about 60 tickets.

By promoting the raffle at town fairs, MetroWest has also been able to publicize itself to residents - and attorneys - who may not be familiar with the work it does. Out of roughly 4,700 attorneys living and working in the three dozen communities it serves, only about 278 donate to the organization, and another 225 are signed up to handle pro bono cases, said Janice Camp, MetroWest's marketing and development coordinator.

MetroWest, which was previously known as South Middlesex Legal Services, has also used the car raffle to publicize the work it does in the community.

"We're doing a re-branding, and we thought that this was a great opportunity to get our name out there," Camp said.

For example, a man at an event in Carlisle who was unfamiliar with MetroWest agreed to buy a raffle ticket after hearing about the work the group does. And the need for free civil legal aid has never been more urgent.

In the last six to eight months, MetroWest has seen a 25 percent increase in requests for help, but it, like every other legal aid organization, doesn't have the staff to meet the needs of the community it serves, leaving two positions unfilled.

MetroWest has to turn away about 50 percent of the people eligible for free legal aid simply because it doesn't have the financing, staff or volunteers to help everyone.

"They're turned away solely because of a lack of resources," Soule said.

Not every organization is using events to find new funding sources, though.

The Legal Assistance Corp. of Central Massachusetts, which covers Worcester County, launched a private bar campaign this summer asking each lawyer in Worcester County to donate the value of two hours of their billable time. Michael P. Angelini, the chairman of Bowditch & Dewey, is leading nearly two dozen attorneys who will personally appeal to the county's 2,000 lawyers for donations.

"It's not that innovative in terms of what other organizations have done, but it's the first time we've done it in our 50-year history," said LACCM Executive Director Jonathan Mannina. "We just decided that this was the approach we would take. If it helps us avoid further layoffs, it'll be a success."

LACCM's \$3.5 million budget for fiscal 2009 has been cut to \$2.4 million for fiscal 2010. The organization has spent money in its reserve fund, frozen salaries, had furloughs, left open positions unfilled and recently laid staff off. Through attrition and layoffs, the 41-person staff is now at 30.

"You can only make so many cuts before you have to take a hard look at staffing, unfortunately," Mannina said.

### **"Very dire times for legal services"**

Legal aid groups are accustomed to stretching out limited resources to meet an overwhelming demand, but this recession has made the impossible even more daunting.

"We are in very dire times for legal services, so people are trying whatever they can to raise a little money," said Lonnie A. Powers, the executive director for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corp. "People are certainly stepping up their efforts more than they ever have before."

MLAC, the largest funding source for civil legal aid programs in the state, had its state funding chopped from \$11 million last year to \$9.5 million in this year's budget.

Powers said MLAC has been encouraging organizations to develop additional funding sources and not rely entirely on MLAC and the Massachusetts Bar Foundation to distribute money from the Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program. Even in a healthy economy, civil legal aid organizations typically turn away a large percentage of the eligible people seeking aid.

After years of modest gains, total IOLTA funds plummeted by 66 percent this year. Funding sources have done what they can to soften the cuts. After distributing \$6.3 million in IOLTA grants in 2008-09, the Massachusetts Bar Foundation recently announced it will award \$5 million in grants for 2009-10. It was only able to do so by using some reserve funds, but MBF leadership decided it was necessary given the plight legal aid groups are facing. "In addition to facing a dramatic reduction in its own funding, the MBF has observed devastating cuts to so many service providers statewide," said Massachusetts Bar Foundation Executive Director Elizabeth M. Lynch. "Our grantees certainly know how to stretch scarce resources, but the lengths to which they've gone to survive this crisis is unprecedented in recent memory. From one end of the state to the other, groups that provide legal assistance to our state's poorest residents are working hard, despite the funding cuts, to ensure these services remain available to those who need them."

## **Fundraise, fundraise, fundraise**

Annual appeals are a necessary part of running a cash-strapped legal services organization. Golf tournaments are a fairly common method for raising money, too, but legal services groups are brainstorming with volunteers and board members to come up with money-generating ideas so they can continue providing free legal services in their communities.

The problem is that legal aid groups usually don't have much experience organizing fundraising events, and the time they do spend on planning and marketing them is time they would otherwise spend handling cases. But given the environment, they're making the time.

Brianne S. Miers, MLAC's communications director, provides local groups with advice and help with organization and production for some of their marketing efforts.

"Everyone's wearing a lot of hats these days" at legal aid groups as they become event planners, Miers said.

Some of this year's events "are more unconventional than the usual legal services fundraising efforts," Miers said, noting that MetroWest and Neighborhood Legal Services Inc. in Lynn have taken the fundraising efforts further than most organizations. NLS drew 150 people to its "ShamROCK for Justice" on March 13 in Lawrence and raised \$5,000. After that "low key" event, staff started thinking of other possibilities.

"We're trying to think creatively what would be fun events and get people out to understand the work we do," NLS Executive Director Sheila Casey said.

Now NLS is raffling off a "wine cellar" - a wine cooler stocked with 50 wines donated by local liquor stores, staff and volunteers. And like MetroWest, NLS is combining the wine cellar raffle with another event, a golf tournament on Sept. 21 at the Andover Country Club - the organization's first.

"We had researched doing a golf tournament for a number of years, but this year, with all the funding cuts, this was the motivation behind it," said Casey. "It's a tough year to start a golf tournament, but we figured, you have to start somewhere."

NLS, which has held silent auctions before, has also stepped up its donor solicitation effort. But it's hoping its efforts will bring in between \$20,000 and \$50,000. And it's had success in the past. NLS held a farewell bash for a previous executive director and raised between \$25,000 and \$30,000. In 2003, it raised \$45,000 at its "Celebration 31" fundraiser roasting and toasting longtime staff attorney John J. Ford; in 2004, it held a gambling cruise; and in 2006, it held a farewell fundraiser for its departing director, Ross Dolloff.

"We see our fundraising efforts as a critical piece of making up the deficit for 2010," Casey said. "We need to make up about a half a million dollars, so these are critical. It makes the staff feel like they're able to do something to mitigate the crisis we're in."

## **The need is greater than ever**

"What we're hearing for stories in this economic crisis is that people who were comfortable have slid into the income level that we address," Casey said. "There are lots of foreclosures. Very rarely did we used to see homeowners in our offices, but that has changed. It's a difficult time, and we're trying to change with it."

NLS is building on its business ties to help it both with short-term and long-term support. Eastern Bank is sponsoring its golf tournament, and NLS is reaching out to vendors and business leaders in the community, asking them to be donors, as well as partners in its fight to help lift people out of poverty.

"We really see our work as going hand-in-hand with the economic recovery that our business community needs to see as well," Casey said. "Our ultimate goal is to help people navigate their way out of poverty by working through their legal problems. That really resonates with the business community."

In the past, Casey said, NLS' message about legal aid for the poor would often fall flat. But in an economic crisis, people see their own family members and friends being laid off, evicted and foreclosed on, so the message is resonating that free legal aid helps fight poverty and homelessness.

"We're certainly hoping to build a bigger circle of supporters through this," she said.

Building relationships is helping Greater Boston Legal Services weather the storm and build a strong base of support for the years ahead.

"To have people give you significant money, you have to build a relationship," said Jack Ward, associate director for finance and development at GBLS, which represents about four dozen communities.

A \$240,000 grant from an overseas foundation that it regularly works with on housing issues has allowed GBLS to save four advocates positions that it was expecting to cut. The \$240,000 is part of a two-year \$840,000 Emergency Bridge Fund that GBLS launched last year, targeting both new donors and asking current donors to give additional money.

"That has helped preserve positions," Ward said.

## **UPCOMING FUNDRAISERS**

[www.mwlegal.org](http://www.mwlegal.org)

Neighborhood Legal Services • Sept. 21

First Annual NLS Golf Tournament  
Andover Country Club  
Featuring a "wine cellar" raffle

[www.neighborhoodlaw.org](http://www.neighborhoodlaw.org)

**MetroWest Legal Services • Nov. 12**

**Evening of Wine Tasting and Art  
Featuring a 2009 Smart Car raffle  
(tickets available online)**

GBLS has already been hit hard. After fans celebrating the Boston Celtics 2008 championship smashed their storefront windows and lobby, GBLS was hit recently with another building cost: Its air conditioning system is failing and will need to be replaced at an expected cost of \$35,000.

To help offset this year's funding decreases, GBLS will probably draw \$2 million out of its reserve fund. It's determining the minimum level it will need to maintain for emergencies.

"We are significantly dipping into our reserve accounts," Ward said.

Through attrition and voluntary layoffs, GBLS has lost nine staff attorneys (out of 70 originally), two paralegals and two or three support staff. Given its size and resources - it has a \$14.5 million budget - GBLS is in a better position to apply for grants and solicit individual donors than some of the smaller legal aid groups.

"We do not do any special events," Ward said. "We feel like we would be drawing from our same pool of donors. We don't want to be in competition. They're so labor intensive, and the net return is minimal."

It has pulled in \$2.8 million from its three-pronged campaign focusing on donations from law firms, in-house legal departments and associates, but maintaining that level of donations will be difficult, especially in a year when law firms have limited hiring and increased layoffs.

"The challenge this year is to maintain that level of giving," Ward said. "We don't want to divert our energies looking elsewhere."

In all, GBLS relies on funding from 40 different federal, state and municipal grants, and it's applied for more government grants this year, particularly with money available through the federal stimulus package. GBLS applied for seven different stimulus grants that would total upwards of \$500,000 over a number of years. It expects to find out if it will be awarded any of them by mid-September.

Ward says the Emergency Bridge Fund has probably maxed out, and GBLS has applied for every grant it could find, but he still wonders if he's left any stone unturned.

"I'm sure I have," he said, "but not that I know of."