

Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services 2010 Volunteer Attorney Participation Plan (VAP)

I. Introduction

The Volunteer Attorney Participation plan for Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS) has three main components which are administered by regional staff. SMRLS operates an East Metro Region VAP program, which serves the 5-county metropolitan St. Paul area. It also operates a Southeast Region VAP program and a Southwest Region VAP program which, together, cover the remaining 28 counties of SMRLS service area.

II. Administration

The regional senior leadership attorneys are responsible for overall administration of the programs. Direct day-to-day functions, such as attorney recruitment and case placement services, are performed by regional volunteer attorney coordinators.

In the East Metro Region, two part-time coordinators carry out the day-to-day functions of the program under the supervision of the senior leadership attorney. All staff are housed in St. Paul.

One senior leadership attorney supervises and has oversight for non-metro programs. Daily SE Region VAP functions are performed by a regional coordinator who is housed in Winona. Daily SW Region VAP functions are performed by the coordinator who is housed in Mankato.

In her executive capacity, SMRLS' CEO has oversight of all three components, as described above. She is also actively involved in recruiting volunteers from targeted firms and corporate legal departments. This additional resource has proven beneficial to the SMRLS VAP program in that potential volunteers have commented that, if it's important enough for the CEO to come to their local firms/businesses, then it's important enough for them to consider volunteering.

III. Program Operation

SMRLS' rural VAP plan is attached, as is the plan for the East Metro Region. Both provide a good description of how the program operates.

IV. Service Models other than Full Representation

Some of the non-case and/or innovative representation initiatives are included in the attached plans. Additionally, SMRLS uses volunteers as follows:

1. We conduct an annual senior legal fair. In 2009, 3 such regional fairs were conducted. Volunteers offer community education sessions to groups of seniors on topics of particular interest to seniors. We've been successful in recruiting volunteers who don't mind making such presentations to groups of non-English speakers, using interpreters provided by SMRLS.

2. We have been fortunate to recruit federal court judges to offer training to staff on federal appellate court practice. One federal judge also has volunteered to conduct a citizenship swearing-in ceremony for seniors at the senior legal fair. As part of that experience, he will also give a presentation on their rights and responsibilities as new citizens.
3. We've recruited attorneys from two corporate legal departments to handle specific case types for SMRLS. They really appreciate the specificity of their initiative because it allows them to have other colleagues in their office as a "sounding-board", as they work on the cases.
4. We've developed a partnership between SMRLS, the Mayo Clinic and the private law firm of Briggs & Morgan to handle naturalization cases for SMRLS in Rochester and Olmsted County, Minnesota. Mayo attorneys work-up the client's naturalization application and work to address any issues that are an impediment to naturalization. When it comes time for the client to be interviewed at the local office of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), attorneys from the St. Paul-based Briggs & Morgan firm accompany the client to the actual interview. This step saves the Mayo volunteer a full day away from his/her office, since he/she doesn't need to travel 2 hours each way to the Twin Cities for the interview. The client is made fully aware of this arrangement at the commencement of the representation and is given the opportunity to object. This has been a very successful arrangement for both SMRLS' clients and its partners.

These are only a few of the innovative ways that SMRLS uses volunteers. New initiatives are routinely under consideration.

V. Continuing Legal Education Seminars

SMRLS' volunteers are encouraged to avail themselves of the reduced fee CLE's offered by the state-wide Legal Services Coalition/State Support unit. These CLE's are both in-person and on-line, which maximizes the volunteers' opportunity to participate.

VI. Input in Developing the Plan

SMRLS has traditionally received input from a broad array of stakeholders, as it undertakes private bar involvement in serving the community. Board members (representing one minority bar association, the Minnesota Women Lawyers Association, corporate legal departments, rural district bar associations, minority communities, etc.) speak for the respective constituencies they represent. Their targeted input is particularly instructive to SMRLS, as it operates its volunteer attorney program.

SMRLS' private fundraising committee, the Campaign for Legal Aid, is composed of practitioners from a cross-section of practice settings. Discussions about creative ways to raise money are typically intertwined with recruitment of volunteer issues, as the committee members share ideas about how lawyers from their particular constituencies want to share both financial

and volunteer resources. For example, government lawyers have not traditionally been a viable pool of prospective volunteers. Two committee members, both of whom are public lawyers, have identified this as a significant issue. Exploration of kinds of work they can do for SMRLS is currently a priority discussion item for the program.

Plan development has also been influenced by discussions at meetings of the Minnesota State Bar Association's Legal Assistance to the Disadvantaged Committee, the State Planning Commission, the judiciary at the federal district court level, input communicated to SMRLS' lawyers as they attend district and county bar association meetings and, more recently, as the result of invitations to come to corporate legal departments to talk about ways those attorneys might become better connected to SMRLS.

Though the plan has certainly been well-informed by the legal community, as set forth, seeking input from the client community has not been as systematized. Input typically comes as the result of community education initiatives where groups and/or service providers might be engaged on the usefulness of having volunteers available to do group presentations. And, so, that has become a component of the plan, i.e., to recruit and use volunteers in this way.

VII. Recognition

SMRLS recognizes the importance of showing appreciation for the work of attorneys who volunteer for the program. SMRLS routinely recognizes its outstanding volunteers at its annual Fall Campaign for Legal Aid Appreciation Luncheon. SMRLS also has nominated attorneys for the Ramsey County and Minnesota State Bar Association's pro bono awards. SMRLS has, from time-to-time, joined with rural district bar associations in recognizing lawyers who have had a demonstrated commitment to serving SMRLS' clients.

VIII. Financial Systems and Practices

VAP expenses are separate and are calculated as percentages based on total hours entered into the case management system. A percentage of indirect costs is charged to the VAP program. Private attorneys who take cases from SMRLS are, for the most part, taking those cases on a strictly volunteer basis. The only exception to this practice is in the instance of a small group of volunteers who take on some of SMRLS' farm law work and an individual attorney who takes on and trains other SMRLS volunteers in the area of immigration law.

IX. Conclusion

This plan, including the specifics contained in the attached regional plan documents, coupled with the staff delivery program, constitutes SMRLS' comprehensive efforts to serve the eligible client community in Southern Minnesota.