

Lawyers Without Fees

Volunteer Lawyer Program gives free legal help to persons in need

What if you had the opportunity to give one dollar and your donation did four dollars-worth of good? In San Diego, one organization gives that rate of return on the charitable donations it receives. San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program (SDVLP) works under a unique pro bono model that allows the organization to leverage its donations four-fold.

“The thing that is so great about supporting SDVLP is the bang for the buck,” says Jeff Isaacs, the organization’s president and a bankruptcy partner at Procopio, Cory, Hargreaves &



Above: Volunteer Lawyers Program volunteers help a client during a Women’s Resource Fair held last March.



Staff and volunteers of San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program.



Amy Fitzpatrick, executive director of the San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program, is shown with board members, from left, Jay Jeffcoat, Jeff Isaacs (board president), and Timothy Cohelan.

Savitch LLP.

A private, nonprofit organization, SDVLP is the county’s oldest and largest pro bono legal services program. The organization’s vision is for people in San Diego County to enjoy equal justice and access to legal services without regard to economic status. To make this vision a reality, SDVLP has a small staff of 20 employees and relies on the generosity of the legal community and others to do the rest.

Working with a \$1.5 million annual budget, SDVLP is able to provide San Diego’s underserved with \$5.5 million in legal services due to the willingness of local attorneys and other volunteers to open their hearts. Each year more than 300 lawyers and law students provide legal services at no charge, which allows the 28-year old organization to do more with less.

Annually, 6,500 individuals turn to SDVLP for assistance. The nonprofit serves the most vulnerable members of our community: the homeless, abused children, domestic violence victims,

elder abuse victims, veterans, immigrants and HIV/AIDS sufferers.

SDVLP’s 2011 Pro Bono of the Year attorney Andrew Kessler, when asked about his most memorable case in the four years he has volunteered with the organization, spoke of his first: an elder abuse/identity

theft case that left his client facing eviction and harsh treatment from a debt collection company pursuing a financial judgment against him, all through no fault of his own. Through Kessler’s hard work, the client was able to stay in his home and have the judgment dismissed. “The client’s heartfelt appreciation is something I will never forget,” he said.

According to Isaacs, most lawyers feel it is part of their professional responsibility to give back to the community. For some, it may mean writing a check, which SDVLP gladly accepts. For others, it means giving of their time — and many do both.

SDVLP is an especially great option for young attorneys who are looking to make a difference. While many are struggling to get out from under law school loans, their financial situation is tight. Making a financial contribution may not be an option, but they can give of their time. Providing pro bono services is an opportunity to learn new skills and get valuable experience. SDVLP provides free training for its volunteers.

Isaac likens the role of a volunteer lawyer to that of a white knight who enters an individual’s life at a time of crisis, helping them through it and having a real impact. “From a professional standpoint, there is nothing more rewarding and more important,” he says.

For more information, including how to volunteer, donate or get assistance from SDVLP, visit sdvlp.org.