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Elder law center offers 'bite-sized' pro bono program

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The Center for Disability & Elder Law has come up with a one-day "bite-sized" pro bono program to help the elderly, and CDEL says the program has growing appeal for lawyers.

More than 100 volunteer lawyers took part in this program in 2008, according to Michael T. Roth, executive director of the Center for Disability & Elder Law.

Winston & Strawn LLP lawyers took part in 2008 as did lawyers from Kirkland & Ellis LLP; Holland & Knight LLP; Sidley, Austin LLP; Baker & McKenzie LLP; Aon Corp; Exelon Corp., and Bank of America.

CDEL is signing up lawyers for six more one-day programs in January and February.

For each bite-sized pro bono event, CDEL trains the volunteer lawyers to draw up three sets of documents for needy seniors: powers-of-attorney for health care, powers-of-attorney for property, and living wills.

CDEL also provides free credit for continuing legal education for that training and malpractice insurance for the pro bono events.

CDEL helps transport the attorneys and some volunteer staff members who are notaries to a senior citizens center to meet pro bono clients interested in possibly executing such documents with a lawyer, Roth said.

For Winston & Strawn attorneys, the

program turned out to be a good way to work alongside the attorneys of one of the law firm's clients, Bank of America, said Gregory A. McConnell, pro bono director for Winston & Strawn.

Law firms have been striving in recent years to work cooperatively with client attorneys on pro bono projects, McConnell said.

On Nov. 13, about 10 Winston attorneys partnered with 10 attorneys from Bank of America led by Associate General Counsel Mary Rose Gage, according to McConnell and Roth.

Roth said the group helped senior citizens at Roseland Manor.

In this way, law firm lawyers "get an opportunity to grow their business by networking with general counsel at the client firm or corporation they want to work with," Roth said.

Twenty-five lawyers from Kirkland & Ellis took part in this pro bono project in 2008 over two different days in November and December, said Terrence J. Dee, litigation partner at Kirkland & Ellis.

Dee said the program is "terrific" for three reasons.

First, lawyers are able to help vulnerable, low-income seniors obtain "absolutely necessary" legal documents that are simple for lawyers but that the pro bono clients might not be able to get otherwise.

Second, Dee said, for corporate lawyers the program provides an unusual chance to

work with a client one on one "on a very personal level." The seniors are grateful, and "our lawyers have found working with seniors extremely satisfying."

Third, "This is an excellent program for lawyers that ... have time issues and can't afford" to take on open-ended pro bono matters, like a criminal appeal, Dee said.

"It is a discrete, scheduled afternoon ... with no carry over.... At the end of it there won't be any other commitment absent you want to do it again on a different afternoon."

Thomas C. Wendt, chief legal officer of CDEL, said the lawyers' assistance to the seniors can help prevent "one of the most frequent causes of elder financial abuse ... by which dishonest people, through fraud or coercion, trick or defraud seniors into ... effectively signing away their rights."

CDEL trains the lawyers for this project at their own law firms or at its Corboy & Demetrio Legal Education Center. Law students with 7-11 licenses can also participate.

CDEL continues to seek more volunteer lawyers. For January and February, it has six of these events planned so far, as follows: Wednesday (Jan. 14) at Buford Walker Senior Housing, 17725 Arcadia Ave., Lansing; Jan. 20, at Drexel Square Apartments, 810 E. Hyde Park Blvd.; Jan. 21 at Senior Suites of Hegewisch, 13550 S. Avenue O; Jan. 28, at West Point Plaza, 300 S. Damen Ave.; Feb. 11 at Winwood Apartments, 1406 W. Winona St.; and Feb. 17 at Kingston Place, 7435 S. Kingston Place.