

Erie County Begins Nonprofit Pro Bono Services

Eligible nonprofits in Erie County may obtain free legal and financial guidance through a new program called the "Nonprofit Pro Bono Project: Professionals Helping Nonprofits." The project was launched in early 2006 by the Erie County Bar Association, Northwestern Legal Services, Erie Chapter of the Pennsylvania Institute of Certified Public Accountants and the Nonprofit Partnership, a capacity building project of the Erie Community Foundation.

The project matches eligible nonprofit organizations with local lawyers and accountants who have volunteered to provide free consultation and education. Services take the form of open enrollment educational law clinics, legal and financial needs assessments, and direct assistance. More than 20 lawyers and accountants volunteered during the first six months of the program.

Tom Tupitza, shareholder with the Erie firm of Knox McLaughlin Gornall & Sennett P.C. and a board member of Northwestern Legal Services and The Nonprofit Partnership, initially suggested the collaborative effort.

"Nonprofits in greatest need of basic legal and financial advisory services are often those with the fewest resources and no connections with professionals in the community," Tupitza said. "We saw this as an opportunity for more attorneys to become involved in pro bono services and for attorneys and accountants to work together."

Recent regulatory changes allow federally-funded legal aid agencies such as Northwestern Legal Services to provide services to qualifying nonprofit organizations, and the success of the Nonprofit Partnership has led to increased awareness of compliance issues among Erie area nonprofits.

"The alignment of these factors made this the right time to launch the effort," Tupitza noted.

The project got underway with an employment law clinic in March, which was attended by 82 representatives of 50 nonprofit organizations. A second clinic on financial compliance attracted 70 participants from 40 agencies. Both clinics received enthusiastic reviews. Additional clinics are planned on bylaws, unemployment compensation, real estate issues and directors' and officers' liability insurance.

Several agencies have been matched with professionals for needs assessments and direct assistance on matters ranging from the preparation of an employee handbook to assistance with an application for federal tax-exempt status. Eligibility for direct assistance is dependent on consideration of financial need.

Founding committee members, in addition to Tupitza, include Amy Cuzzola-Kern, Ph.D., vice president of Programs at the Erie Community Foundation; Sandra Brydon Smith, executive director of the Erie County Bar Association; Bob Oakley, executive director of Northwestern Legal Services; Dave Pianta, C.P.A., Appletree & Kern P.C., Erie; and Robin Koble, project coordinator for The Nonprofit Partnership.

Through the generous contribution of time and expertise by Erie area professionals, the effectiveness of local nonprofit organizations will be enhanced. The end result will be a positive impact on the thousands of lives touched by these organizations.