For the past year, it has been my privilege and honor to serve as the president of our great Pennsylvania Bar Association. Perhaps most important to me have been the wonderful friendships and the camaraderie developed from traveling the state and the extraordinary hospitality, kindness and support that so many of you have given me.

During my term, we have seen extraordinary collective action by lawyers across the commonwealth — especially by members of the PBA and local bar associations — for the betterment of the legal profession. The excitement, energy, enthusiasm and hard work of so many of you made the year a truly rewarding one, proving that when Pennsylvania’s lawyers act together with a common purpose, tremendous results can be achieved.

In late January, bar leaders from across the state spoke out against a sales tax on professional legal services that would have imposed a significant burden on access to legal services. We lawyers played an important, active part in the democratic process, alerting legislators to the full implications of taxing elderly Pennsylvanians for the preparation of a simple will, taxing battered spouses seeking a lawyer’s services to obtain protection from abuse or taxing legal services to homeowners facing mortgage foreclosure. The state House of Representatives wisely saw the merits of our argument and rejected the legal services tax by the overwhelming vote of 148 to 47.

Another example of the power of the legal community was on shining display with the organized bar’s swift and effective response to the misguided “Vote No” campaign during the 2007 judicial retention elections. Here the legal community joined in common purpose to protect the state judiciary from a threat that placed 700 years of judicial experience at risk. The collective action by lawyers and bar leaders across the state included development of the PBA’s PAVoteSmart Web site, which provided detailed information about judicial candidates, and creation of the “You Need to Know” public service campaign reaffirming the organized bar’s message that each judge should be considered based on his or her individual record of judicial service. From the statewide rapid response team to meetings with editorial boards and countless opinion-editorial pieces and radio and television appearances, lawyers demonstrated their dedication to the preservation and betterment of our justice system. A special thanks to Ken Horoho, PBA immediate past president, for his efforts on this critical issue, especially for selflessly facilitating a seamless transition that helped to place the organized bar and this president in a position to respond effectively when the “Vote No” campaign was launched in September. While some were concerned we were risking too much, our combined actions made a real difference in protecting our justice system, with voters rejecting the “Vote No” call and judges being retained by historic voting norms.

Of course, this does not mean there is no additional work to be done. Lawyers must constantly look to improve our justice system. To that end, the PBA Task Force on Judicial Performance Assessment, following the lead of the Task Force on the Pennsylvania Judicial System, has now begun its work in earnest under the leadership of former PBA President Mike Reed.

In the same spirit of collective action, eight Pennsylvania-area law schools convened in early April in Philadelphia for the inaugural, PBA co-sponsored Law Policy Forum to address issues in the national presidential campaign spotlight just ahead of Pennsylvania’s April 22 presidential primary. Allowing the organized bar to tap into the collective academic expertise of our regional law schools, the forum explored key issues regarding the rule of law in the context of the war on terror and immigration reform. And, celebrating the 50th anniversary of Law Day on May 1 and throughout the month, lawyers statewide will trumpet the importance of the rule of law as a central aspect of our justice system and a cornerstone of our democracy by providing legal education in our schools. Pennsylvania’s first lady, Judge Marjorie Rendell of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, will again be at the center of our Law Day efforts as she discusses her honor’s PennCORD Keystone Programs initiative, which will serve to
enhance the legal community’s steadfast commitment to civics education and literacy in the classroom.

At the time of this publication, the PBA will be building on the effort to increase our grassroots legislative presence in Harrisburg through the 11th annual PBA on the Hill program. We ask lawyers from across the state to join with us by traveling to Harrisburg on May 5-6 and becoming a part of democracy in action by meeting with their legislators to discuss matters of importance to the legal community. A central theme to this event is increasing public and legislator awareness about the significant unmet need for legal services. Lawyers are justifiably proud of landmark legal decisions such as Brown v. Board of Education, which concluded that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. But we lawyers know that legal rights cannot be fully realized without enforcement and protection. That is why the PBA has long supported expanding and improving access to legal services.

Most recently, this has been demonstrated by the PBA House of Delegates’ adoption of an aspirational call for pro bono service by all lawyers, support for increased legal services funding from the state and provision of a civil right to counsel in certain limited circumstances. When the welfare of a child is in jeopardy, when a person’s residence is being taken away, when health care benefits are at risk of being terminated and when a person’s basic sustenance is threatened, we must aspire to provide access to a lawyer’s services. Following up on all of these efforts will be the ongoing work of the PBA Task Force on Legal Access led by Dveera Segal of Villanova University School of Law.

As my year draws to a close, incoming PBA President C. Dale McClain will bring continued great energy to our association.

As a solo practitioner, Dale offers a practice-oriented, common sense approach to the leadership of the PBA. Our Long Range Planning and Strategic Goals Committee, under the leadership of incoming PBA President-elect Cliff Haines and others, is currently working to identify the core goals of our association, develop implementation strategies to achieve those goals and establish measurement tools that will enable the PBA to make continued meaningful progress on issues of importance to our members. With Dale’s leadership, these goals will be advanced, as will this association’s historic dedication to preserving, protecting and bettering our justice system; enhancing lawyers’ professional excellence and the quality of our practices and practice lives; improving access to legal services; and increasing diversity in the profession.

There are too many people to thank by name here, including my family, PBA staff, countless local county bar staff and officers, the PBA Board of Governors and officers of the association, and, most important, you, the members. Without everyone’s support, including the support of my law firm, White and Williams L.L.P., the accomplishments of this past bar year would not have been possible.

I am excited about the future of the PBA and grateful for the opportunity to have served. Put simply, serving as PBA president has been the greatest honor of my life.

Andrew F. Susko
PBA President