

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

Legal aid groups redefine fund raising

*By Bill Myers
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Law firms, in-house departments and courts may be closed or working less at this time of year, but for those who raise money for legal aid groups it's peak season.

"We all have sort of a big, end-of-the-year push," said Robert B. Acton, executive director Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic.

The clinic's budget for fiscal 2005 is \$546,000, Acton said. About 34 percent of it comes from individual donations.

Cabrini Green Legal Aid has long relied on individual donations to make ends meet, Acton said. He attributes this to the fact that the clinic was founded by a church 31 years ago and that the church's members continue to take an active interest in the clinic's health.

But Acton said the clinic's approach to individual fund raising has gotten more sophisticated.

Over the last decade, legal aid and nonprofit legal groups have hired full-time development staffs, brought in marketing consultants and generally sought to improve the ways that they raise money.

Robert A. Glaves, the executive director of Chicago Bar Foundation, said it took a while for legal aid groups to realize that there is big money in individual wallets.

"Individual donations are a critical part of our fund raising and something we're focusing much more on as we look toward the future," he said.

Government and foundation grants, as well as law firm donations, are a big help, but it is a narrow and crowded pool, Glaves said.

The Bar Foundation has a budget of about \$1.1 million. About one-third of that comes from individual donations, Glaves said.

Like at the Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic, most of those individual donations come at year's end, Glaves said.

Glaves said that legal aid groups traditionally relied on big law firms, government and private foundations, or yearly galas to get money.

But in the last decade, law firms have merged — shrinking the pool of available sources — government funds have been cut and private foundations have been swamped, which leaves only the galas and individuals.

Individuals, though, are — as yet — untapped, Graves said.

"First of all, we have a natural market of lawyers for the cause. And then there's people beyond lawyers who care about these things," Graves said.

Yet, "when you ask someone why they didn't give, the most common answer is: they weren't asked," Graves said.

Charles S. Hughes a partner at Chapman and Cutler LLP, agrees. He is an annual donor to the Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic, but he said he had to seek them out and was not solicited.

"I found out about them just looking generally for ways to become involved with legal aid and pro bono work in the city and in the process I saw their mission statement, which struck me," he said.

Hughes said that he is solicited by charities quite a bit, but few of them come from legal aid groups.

That may be about to change, though, Graves said.

In the last decade, legal aid groups have brought on professional fund raisers and marketers to help tailor their individual appeals, Graves said.

One of the things CBF's development officer does is focus efforts on obtaining stock donations, Graves said. The group has long accepted stock as a gift, but it took a development professional to realize that it could make stock gifts a centerpiece of the pitch, Graves said.

Hiring full-time development pros is a tough choice to make because legal aid groups don't have spare cash, Graves said. But committing to fund raising pays for itself, Graves said.

"It's the old cliché: 'you've got to spend money to make money,' " Graves said.

Not always, said Margaret C. Benson, the executive director of Chicago Volunteer Legal Services.

CVLS ties its year-end pitches to its "fabulous" annual report, which is designed, laid out and printed for free by a Chicago advertising firm, Benson said.

Even if CVLS had to pay for the service it would be worth it, Benson added.

"It's an important part of our budget because it doesn't cost us that much to raise a

huge amount of money," Benson said.

CVLS raises about 10 percent of its annual budget from individual donors — the annual Race Judicata remains the group's largest fund-raiser — but gathering money from single donations has important symbolic consequences, Benson said.

"It's important for other funders [government, law firms, foundations, etc.] to see that you're getting support from members," she said.

The end of the year, with the confluence of the holidays and the approach of tax season, makes an excellent time to canvas for support, Benson said.

But, while it doesn't neglect to mention the holidays, CVLS ties its appeal to its annual report.

Benson said CVLS practically stumbled on their year-end, fund-raising pitch when they decided to redesign their annual report.

"We've always done an annual report but it was produced entirely in-house" and its production values left a lot to be desired, Benson said.

Then, about 10 years ago, Benson said she went to a publishing trade show to look at award-winning designs. She was hoping to get some ideas that CVLS could use in its report.

"I came back and said, 'This is really depressing. There's no way in hell we can do something like this. We're lawyers, for God's sake,'" Benson said.

Out of desperation, Benson dropped letters in the mail to advertising firms, asking for them to volunteer their design expertise. She did not have high expectations.

"I wrote and said, 'We're this great organization is there anybody out there who can give us some help?' It was a shot in the dark and it worked," she said.

Benson estimates the value of the donated design and layout to be about \$25,000 — more than a quarter of what CVLS makes from its annual Race Judicata.

Acton, the executive director of the Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic, said his group, too, benefits from volunteer marketing help. One of the clinic's board members is a marketing consultant who has helped organize the clinic's fund raising and give it a more professional sheen.

The clinic's year-end fund raising begins formally at Thanksgiving, Acton said. Past and prospective supporters receive a letter thanking them for their help and talking about the clinic's accomplishments in the previous year.

The clinic tailors its letters individually for high-tab donors.

The Thanksgiving letter is followed by another letter just before Christmas, Acton said.

A copy of this year's letter tells its recipient, "*We need to grow*. Due to current financial constraints, CGLA cannot represent fully half of those who come to us seeking help. Last year, that equated to 586 vulnerable people." Acton said that about 10 percent to 15 percent of those approached for individual donations actually give to the clinic. That's a very high response rate.

For Graves, it's not high enough. He said he hopes legal aid groups will continue to emphasize individual donations because the work of groups like his "fits into what it means to be a lawyer."

"This is a market that, at least potentially, every single lawyer has that connection to," Graves said. "And we know that. So it's important that we reach out to them."