



Serving the civil legal needs of the poor and disadvantaged on Madison County, Alabama

Madison County VLP Making Great Strides

The first organized pro bono program in the state, established in 1982, was the Madison County Lawyer Referral Service. Originally, attorneys who wanted to be registered with the county lawyer referral service agreed to take one pro bono case per year for every area of law in which they registered. The program expanded in 1999 to add a purely volunteer component, and in 2001 the program became solely a Volunteer Lawyers Program. It is now called the *Madison County Volunteer Lawyers Program* (MCVLP). It is sponsored by the Huntsville-Madison County Bar Association. Each year, the MCVLP provides low-income citizens with access to our civil justice system.

A renewed commitment

Although it is the oldest program, in 2009, the MCVLP underwent a renewal in many ways. **Angela Rawls** joined the program as its new executive director last November. The organization recently opened a new office close to the courthouse, providing good accessibility for both lawyers and clients. Best of all, the program has added 125 new members—attorneys committed to donating their time and services to help those in need.

"At this point, we're starting over in a lot of ways," Rawls says. "We continue to promote the VLP at each monthly meeting of the bar, and we're really finding there is a lot of enthusiasm for the program."

The revitalization of the MCVLP was headed by Huntsville-Madison County Bar Commissioner **Richard Raleigh**, who organized a task force for the purpose of improving pro bono services in Madison County. Task force members are **John Brinkley, Amy Creech, Juanita Sales Lee, Teresa R. Lewis, Kimberly B. Martin, Benjamin L. McArthur, Rebekah Keith McKinney, Sandra D. Parker, Valerie H. Plante, Angela S. Rawls, Charles A. Ray, IV, Tom Ryan, Frank S. Ward, and H.A. "Buck" Watson, Jr.**

The goal=300

Raleigh now serves as president of the MCVLP board. The goal is to have 300 attorneys enrolled in the MCVLP in 2010. This would represent about half the membership of the Huntsville-Madison County Bar Association.

"The transformation of the Madison County Volunteer Lawyers Program this year has been amazing," says Raleigh. "The members of the task force worked hard to increase the numbers—numbers of lawyer volunteers and numbers of cases assigned and closed—and also increase awareness in our community of the services provided and train our volunteers to increase both the quality and quantity of the services provided. Obviously, given the economic events and conditions of 2009, free legal services—advice on civil law matters—to citizens of Madison County living in poverty were, and are, desperately needed. Our goal was to lay the framework for success in the future, and I think we have been successful. It has been a real pleasure to work with so many lawyers who are truly dedicated to giving back to the community. I know of few other professions where people work this hard to give away their services for free. I am proud of what we are doing. But, we have so much



Thomas J. Methvin

work left to do."

Innovative services

In addition to its regular caseload, the MCVLP held three legal clinics in 2009, most of them in conjunction with the first nationwide observance of Pro Bono Week, October 25-31. These included "Wills for Heroes," "Senior Services" and a "Divorce Clinic."

The divorce clinic was an innovation designed to improve the MCVLP. It was presented in two parts. The first part was a free CLE course to teach lawyers who had no experience with family law matter how to handle an uncontested divorce.

During the second part of the day, those same lawyers, along with others more experienced in family law, helped clients with divorce cases. They were able to assist 25 people during that part.

"A huge part of what we see is family law, but we don't want to overburden the family lawyers," Rawls explained. "So we developed the idea of helping the other lawyers learn how to handle these types of claims that may be outside of their usual practice areas. And, we always have resources and training materials here at our office to help them."

Increasing community awareness

In addition to involving more lawyers in the program, the MCVLP is focusing on increasing awareness in the community. The goal is to make the connection between the people who can help—lawyers—and those who need help.

"We have a monopoly on helping people with legal needs," Rawls says. "These are things that only we can do. There are people who have problems finding housing, or filing foreclosure, or getting a divorce. Finding these people the help they need benefits them and the rest of the community as well. Volunteer lawyer service also helps lawyers remember why we do what we do, and remember our commitment to serve the public."

Peer recognition for outstanding achievement


In November 2009, the Madison County Volunteer Lawyers Program was recognized for its outstanding achievements and growth as the recipient of the newly-established **Beasley Allen Pro Bono Award & Grant**. The \$10,000 grant will be used to further the MCVLP's pro bono work.

Madison County lawyers need to be commended for what they are doing. This is truly an inspiration to our entire bar.

To sign up, go online, call (256) 539-2275 or e-mail info@vlpmadisoncounty.com.
—Thomas J. Methvin, president, Alabama State Bar

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