

## DC Firms Honored For Local Legal Services Donations

By Alison Knezevich

*Law360 (June 11, 2024, 12:04 PM EDT)* -- The D.C. Access to Justice Commission is recognizing 39 law firms for their financial contributions to legal aid providers in Washington, saying the private bar's support is crucial to meeting the community's needs.

The firms that qualified for the annual Raising the Bar campaign donated a total of \$6.6 million last year to local organizations that serve low- and moderate-income clients, the commission said Tuesday. This year's announcement comes as both D.C. residents and the nonprofits that provide legal services face rising expenses.

"The increasing cost of living, economic stressors, and lingering social and economic effects from the pandemic continue to exact a disproportionate toll on the district's low-income communities — and make legal services more expensive to provide," James Sandman, the commission's vice chair, said in a statement announcing this year's qualifying firms. "Legal services create opportunity, but demand remains higher than supply and is still growing, especially for help with housing and domestic violence, among other areas."

The D.C. Court of Appeals founded the commission in 2005 to increase access to the civil legal justice system.

The commission's annual Raising the Bar effort recognizes firms that donate a certain percentage of their D.C. office revenue to local legal services organizations during the course of a year.

"The reason it was launched back in 2010 was to set a standard for what we hope our law firm community does in this area, and it's more important than ever," the commission's executive director, Nancy Drane, told Law360.

Not only are local organizations' costs increasing, but the rising cost of living makes it even more critical that residents can get legal help in areas such as housing and public benefits, she said.

Legal aid groups in D.C. have faced the possibility of drastic public funding reductions in recent years. This year, Mayor Muriel Bowser's budget would have cut their funding by 67%, to about \$10.5 million, but the D.C. Council voted to keep appropriation levels what they were the previous year.

"The prospect of losing that public funding really amplified the importance and critical role that civil legal services play in our community," Drane said.

The number of firms participating in Raising the Bar has grown over the years from 23 in the first annual campaign.

The initiative recognizes firms at three levels: Platinum for those who give 0.11% of their D.C. office revenue; gold for those who give 0.09%; and silver for those who give 0.075%.

The 2023 total is down from the previous year's \$7.3 million, which was the most ever.

The campaign is designed to allow firms of any size to participate. Because the standards are a percentage of revenue rather than a set dollar amount, firms must increase their giving to qualify as their revenues grow.

Sara Tennen, the executive director of the DC Volunteer Lawyers Project, said contributions from private firms make a crucial difference for the nonprofit, which provides pro bono services to domestic violence survivors, at-risk children and immigrants affected by gender-based violence.

"The financial support from the private sector is unrestricted funding for us," she said. "Unlike our funding that is directly connected to grants and has really strict limitations on how it can be spent, unrestricted funding gives us the greatest level of flexibility as an organization."

Among the challenges facing DCVLP is the difficulty of recruiting attorneys who speak languages other than English. Tennen said the organization has worked hard to obtain services such as document translation, as well as interpreters to help clients prepare for cases.

"But there's really nothing better than the gold standard, which is having an attorney who speaks the client's native language," Tennen said. "And we have to turn away clients on a regular basis because we are not able to fill that gap right now."

Tennen added that volunteer lawyers can do life-changing work — such as helping someone get a civil protection order or assisting in a custody case — in a short period of time.

"We're uniquely situated to be able to make a really big difference, sometimes with not that big of a time commitment," she said.

Commission leaders said the campaign highlights the collaboration between private firms and the legal services nonprofit community.

"The enduring commitment of D.C. law firms to supporting our civil justice system has resulted in a robust public-private partnership, and we will continue to work together toward ensuring all D.C. residents, regardless of income, have access to justice," Peter Edelman, the commission's chair, said in a statement.

At D.C.-headquartered Crowell & Moring LLP, firm Chair Phil Ingle told Law360 that participating in the campaign "is important to the people in our firm."

"Our crowd really believes in this kind of contribution," he said, which is part of "helping to share our privileges and our blessings with other people."

The impact of local service providers' work is clear to those in the legal profession, he said.

"Anybody who's ever practiced in the D.C. Superior Court can see the difference it makes to have competent representation," Inglima said.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.

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