



Joe Surkiewicz: CLC celebrates 25 years of helping neighborhoods

Posted: 7:00 pm Sunday, October 30, 2011

By Joe Surkiewicz

After a quarter-century of service to nonprofits and neighborhoods around the state, the **Community Law Center** is throwing a party. The guest of honor at next week's event is Maryland Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler, who will be inducted onto the center's honorary board of directors. Back up a minute: What is the Community Law Center?

The center started 25 years ago as a group of community organizers and lawyers who wanted to help nonprofits trying to make a difference in Baltimore. They also wanted to give a voice to distressed community organizations in the city.

"There was no assistance out there," said Executive Director Kristine Dunkerton. "We started as a volunteer group, eventually got a staff, and grew."

Today, the Community Law Center is a nonprofit law firm that represents both nonprofits and community organizations throughout the state.

"The group can be large or small, just getting started or very well-established," Dunkerton said. "We work with a wide array of organizations, from animal welfare groups and community associations to low-income housing developers. We only represent groups, not individuals."

The issues handled by CLC attorneys run the gamut — "any type of legal issue faced by a nonprofit organization," Dunkerton said.

"Issues include helping an organization get started with articles of incorporation or obtaining tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status," she said. "We also help organizations with their legal needs as they strengthen their organizations or fulfill their missions. This can involve revising bylaws, purchasing and rehabilitating property, drafting contracts, reviewing documents, or negotiating agreements."

Other cases handled by the Community Law Center include helping communities address nuisance abatement issues — vacant properties used for illegal drug distribution, vacant lots full of trash and debris, liquor establishments drawing crime and violence, or a zoning use opposed by the neighborhood.

The center also helps communities turn the nuisance into a neighborhood asset by, say, getting permission to convert an abandoned lot into a community garden or to paint a mural.

"The kinds of cases handled by the CLC are perfect opportunities for private lawyers to pitch in and volunteer to help nonprofits and community groups pro bono," Dunkerton said.

The center's Pro Bono Program currently boasts over 350 volunteer attorneys from across the state. Volunteers come from a wide mix of the private bar, including private practitioners, attorneys in large firms, in-house counsel for corporations, and law school professors and clinical programs.

"The CLC's Pro Bono Program offers opportunities for both transactional attorneys and for litigators," Dunkerton said. "Attorneys uninterested in stepping into a courtroom have lots of opportunities to help with tax matters, real estate, and contracts.

"And for those looking for litigation, we offer the opportunity to control a case from start to finish," she said. "We also have a lot of intake procedures to ready the client to work with a lawyer, because many of them have never done so before. We help them organize their case so that the volunteer lawyer ends up with a very discrete issue."

In addition, the Community Law Center holds a number of popular spring and fall workshops.

"We limit the number of participants, so each person can get one-on-one attention," Dunkerton said. "We structure the workshops for anyone volunteering or working for a small nonprofit or community organization. We also encourage attorneys who are interested in volunteering to attend the workshop if it is an area of the law they are unfamiliar with, such as a liquor license protest or a 501(c)(3) application."

CLC staffers also go out to community meetings and talk about topics of interest, such as legal issues involved in creating a community benefits agreement for a new development or gating an alley to help deter crime. And they go to nonprofit board meetings to make presentations.

Like most nonprofits, the Community Law Center is faced with funding issues related to the recession. Since 2008, the number of staff attorneys has been halved. "A lot of the foundations who fund us have scaled back," Dunkerton said. "We've had to rely on individuals and corporations to make donations, as well as holding an annual fundraising event."

Back to the party: The CLC will offer for sale three of its signature briefcases decorated by local celebrities for the evening's silent auction.

The first, featuring a Ravens logo, is signed by the players and filled with sports memorabilia. The second is a "Law and Order" briefcase sponsored by Baltimore Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld and Baltimore State's Attorney Gregg Bernstein; it's loaded with DVDs of the TV show. The third is a chef's briefcase from John Shields, the chef at Gertrude's Restaurant, with a gift certificate and signed cookbooks.

The event also will feature other goodies, such as an anniversary cake baked by Charm City Cakes and other delicacies donated by area restaurants and caterers.

The party is Nov. 9 from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at Westminster Hall on the campus of the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law in Baltimore. Tickets can be purchased in advance or at the door. For information, go to www.communitylaw.org or call 410-366-0922.

Joe Surkiewicz is the director of communications at Maryland Legal Aid. His email is jsurkiewicz@mdlab.org

Complete URL: <http://thedailyrecord.com/2011/10/30/clc-celebrates-25-years-of-helping-neighborhoods/>