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Bar program helps lawyers connect

Network gives lawyers a new way to reach out to each other in times of crisis.

SOLACE, which stands for Support of Lawyers/Legal Personnel ? All Concern Encouraged, has been a network for Louisiana's legal community since 2002. Other SOLACE programs organized by state bar associations and chapters of the Federal Bar Association are now in at least nine states and Puerto Rico.

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Earlier this year, U.S. District Judge Jay Zainey got an email about a young family in trouble. The couple, both lawyers in New Orleans, were on vacation when their 19-month-old daughter fell ill and, for a time, was in a medically induced coma. The family needed a medical evacuation airlift to get her back to New Orleans, but their insurance company was saying it wouldn't pay.

Zainey, a New Orleans federal judge who has coordinated a support network for Louisiana's legal community since 2002, sent their request to the network and was flooded with responses from members who had contacts with hospitals, medical transport companies and the couple's insurance company. Within 12 hours, plans were under way to bring the family home.

It was an extreme situation, but Zainey said it fits the motto of the program, Support of Lawyers/Legal Personnel – All Concern Encouraged, or SOLACE: Nothing too big, nothing too small. Similar programs are fast taking root in bar associations across the country, where officials say they've been inspired by Zainey and the Louisiana model to create networks of their own.

The program takes place almost entirely online: Volunteer coordinators, such as Zainey, maintain lists of email addresses for members of the legal community — lawyers, paralegals, legal secretaries and others — who agree to participate; in some states, coordinators involve the entire bar. Coordinators field requests for assistance and email them to the network. Requests can be as big as help involving a medical evacuation or as small as needing a dog-sitter for a family travelling to a hospital in another state.

SOLACE programs organized by state bar associations and chapters of the Federal Bar Association are now in at least nine states and Puerto Rico. Plans to develop programs are under way in at least four more states, including Georgia, Florida and Texas, as well as the District of Columbia. What's more, the American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, inspired by SOLACE, is creating a national online message board where lawyers can post and respond to requests for help.

Zainey has become the unofficial national SOLACE spokesman. At an event hosted by the District of Columbia chapter of the Federal Bar Association on July 24, he gave his pitch: SOLACE works because it has a reach that goes beyond its members, he said. In Louisiana, there are 7,500 people signed up. If each member has 10 friends or family members they can forward requests, he said, that means there are at least 75,000 people who may be in a position to respond.

One lawyer may not be able to change the world, he told the D.C. gathering, but "each of us in this room can change people's worlds."

Bar leaders in cities and states with SOLACE programs point to Zainey as the inspiration. "He proselytizes this thing and is doing a heck of a job," said Michael McElroy, a solo practitioner in Providence, R.I., and president of the Rhode Island Bar Association. The SOLACE program in Rhode Island, which launched last year after past president Lise Iwon heard Zainey speak, has more than 300 members.

"It enables all the lawyers in Rhode Island to support their colleagues in a really meaningful, compassionate way when they need help," McElroy said. "Everybody wants to do that. A lot of times people need help and you don't know about it."

Zainey said his long-term vision is to create a national network. "At the end of the day, we have this common bond," he said during the D.C. gathering. "And that common bond is the law and the legal community."

FREQUENT FLIERS

The idea for SOLACE came out of an incident that hit Zainey close to home. Several months after he took the bench in early 2002, the wife of a friend suffered a brain aneurysm. Zainey asked what he could do to help. The friend, New Orleans attorney Mark Surprenant, told Zainey that his family could manage — his wife, also an attorney, survived — but suggested the idea of a network where members of the legal community could ask one another for help in a time of need. Zainey said Surprenant wanted to "make something good out of this bad experience."

Surprenant and Zainey brought the idea to the Louisiana State Bar Association, which agreed to help coordinate it. It took off after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Zainey said, when lawyers from across the state responded to requests through the SOLACE network for everything from law library access to housing. Besides Zainey, there are volunteer coordinators in different regions around the state.

SOLACE programs can vary in other states, but there tend to be some common rules. All requests are anonymous, unless a requester gives permission otherwise. Members are usually a part of the legal community, but they can ask for help on behalf of people who aren't. Requests are never supposed to be directly for money, although in-kind requests such as frequent-flier miles are allowed. In states where a judge is involved, as is the case in Louisiana, it's particularly important that money stay out of the equation, Zainey said.

In most SOLACE or SOLACE-inspired programs — the Ohio State Bar Association named its program OSBAid, for example — there are volunteer coordinators who field requests and maintain email lists. In some states, such as Louisiana, judges are directly involved.

The requests have ranged from the mundane to the extreme. On July 30, Zainey sent an email to Louisiana members with two requests on both ends of the spectrum: The first was for frequent-flier miles and other transportation assistance for a dying member of a young attorney's family. The second was from a Louisiana attorney looking to give away a set of law books.

Carol Marx, immediate past president of the Ohio State Bar Association, said that part of the appeal of SOLACE is that the help that's needed often has little to do with the law. Lawyers can give back to their community through pro bono legal work, she said, but "this is a way we can be involved with our colleagues without having to do more of our job."

In Ohio, bar leaders send requests to the entire membership of between 28,000 and 29,000 lawyers and legal professionals. Marx said they've sent a couple of requests so far and have gotten "a lot of positive feedback" since launching the program in May.

SOLACE coordinators relying on voluntary sign-ups say progress is slow but encouraging. Judge Nancy Allf of the Eighth Judicial District Court in Nevada said the SOLACE program in that state is approaching 480 members since launching in January. Allf, the program's chairwoman, said she put together a "battle plan" for outreach and is expecting membership to grow as word spreads.

The D.C. chapter of the Federal Bar Association is still in the planning stages of launching a SOLACE program, but chapter President Steven Miller said it is aiming to roll it out by the end of the summer. He said the chapter secured support from U.S. District Chief Judge Royce Lamberth, who introduced Zainey at the July 24 event, in the hope that "people might at least give it a little attention in the midst of thousands of messages they have to review."

Lamberth said he liked that the program focused on creating bonds within the legal community, especially one as large as Washington. "I think it's the kind of thing that could be a great asset," he said. Professionals in particular, he added, "are reluctant to ask for help and acknowledge that they don't know what to do."

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