



Providing
SOLACE
to the Legal Community

BY LARRY CENTOLA

How would you like to have a network of well-connected, smart, motivated persons who were willing to help at a moment's notice of a personal crisis? How would you like to have access to emergency travel arrangements, access to hospital and medical personnel, and access to a host of medical experts? If you are lucky enough to live or practice in an area with a SOLACE program, this amazing network and access is available to you, available to your family, and available to your staff free of charge.

SOLACE is an acronym for Support of Lawyers/Legal Personnel—All Concern Encouraged. The sole purpose of the SOLACE program is to allow the legal community to reach out in meaningful and compassionate ways to judges, lawyers, court personnel, paralegals, legal secretaries, and their families who experience deaths or other catastrophic illnesses, sickness, or injury.

The way the program works is simple, but the effects are significant. Each SOLACE program has at least one program coordinator. SOLACE members notify one of the program coordinators when that person learns of a member of the legal community in need. Through working with the member and close friends of the family, the program coordinator will then determine what would be the most appropriate expression of support, concern, and assistance. The requested action can range from simply sending the family a card signed by local and state leaders to providing the family with meals, needed support, assistance with grocery shopping or child care, or other similar services.

The Origins of the Program

SOLACE was co-founded in New Orleans by Hon. Jay Zainey, U.S. district court judge for the Eastern District of Louisiana, appointed by President George W. Bush on Feb. 19, 2002, and by Mark C. Suprenant, a New Orleans attorney and the current president of the New Orleans Bar Association. In 2002, Suprenant's wife, a New Orleans attorney, was ill. Zainey asked his friend, Suprenant, if there was anything Zainey or the legal community could do to help the Suprenants in their time of need. Suprenant could not think of anything they needed, and he respectfully declined Zainey's offer of assistance.

After Mrs. Suprenant successfully battled her illness and recovered, Mr. Suprenant had a revelation: There had to be people in the legal community who could use a helping hand during their time of need—the same kind of help offered by Zainey. Suprenant pitched the idea of a network of members of the legal community who could respond when other members of the legal community requested assistance. Zainey loved the idea. He thought the idea was feasible and beneficial. This program did not require a large commitment from the potential members, yet the program had the potential to yield great dividends for the person in need. Hence, SOLACE was born as a program started independently by Zainey and Suprenant.

Zainey has tirelessly championed the program since its beginnings. Early on, the Louisiana State Bar Association adopted the program in Louisiana. Since SOLACE's founding in 2002, Zainey has given countless presentations on the program, both informally and in the context of a formal professionalism continuing law education. Judge Zainey has traveled the nation speaking about the SOLACE program at American Bar Association conventions, national bar presidents' conventions, state bar conventions, and pretty much any lawyer group that will cede him the time to speak. Zainey has recruited members, helped found SOLACE programs across the nation, and helped law-

yers help thousands of persons in need. Although Zainey has been the engine, the program's success is due to the collaborative efforts of many selfless lawyers across the country. There are now SOLACE programs in more than 20 locations from Nebraska to Georgia, from Texas to Massachusetts, from Nevada to Puerto Rico.

While the goal of the SOLACE program is to help those in need, the residual public relations benefits help with our overall lawyer image. SOLACE does not tout its successes to people outside the program, but when people in the community are helped in the amazing ways that SOLACE facilitates, the word of mouth about the legal community is overwhelmingly positive. The program is open to members of the legal community and to their family members, including the family members of legal staff. Because of the reach of the program and the results of the program, the positive lawyer public relations extend beyond the legal community.

The Mechanics Are Simple

The SOLACE program has been able to help so many people partly due to its ease of use. According to Michael Kinney, the program coordinator in Nebraska, "SOLACE is so effective, so efficient, and so immediate. It could not be structured any better."

SOLACE harnessed the power of social networking for altruistic action before there were such things as Facebook and Instagram. SOLACE has used the speed and user-friendly nature of email to help thousands of people in the legal community.

There are at least two ways to create the SOLACE network. One way is a voluntary program whereby SOLACE members have to initially sign up to be a member. Once one signs up, that member will receive emails from the program coordinator asking for assistance for someone in the legal community—be it a fellow lawyer, spouse of an attorney, a legal staff member, or a child of someone in the legal community. If a member can provide assistance, the member is asked to contact either the requesting party or the program coordinator with an offer of help. There is never any pressure to offer assistance. If a member can help, then the help is accepted and much appreciated. If a member cannot help that particular person on that particular day, there will be another e-mail when the member's talents and contacts will be needed in the future.

A second way to create a SOLACE program is to automatically enroll the members of a bar association and give the members the ability to opt out of future emails with an unsubscribe or opt-out option at the bottom of the email. In both the voluntary and opt-out method, the program director still acts as the distributor of information to the SOLACE members. Depending on the sensitive nature of the topic, the program director may also act as the contact person for the legal community member in need.

The Nebraska State Bar Association employs the unsubscribe method and has a 94 percent retention rate for the bar members remaining SOLACE members. One of the advantages of the unsubscribe method is that you capture people who may be members of your bar association or organization but may not live in your immediate geographic area, thereby geographically expanding your network.

Of course, any SOLACE program needs not only the network of people offering help but also needs people in the legal community to identify those in need. So even if a lawyer may not have contacts at the highest medical level, that lawyer is an asset to the program as that lawyer likely knows or will know someone in the legal community that could use the assistance of SOLACE.

Nothing Too Big

When he speaks about the SOLACE program, Zainey emphasizes the tagline for the program: “Nothing too big, nothing too small.” This tagline is meant to remind the SOLACE members that when they become aware of any legal community member with a need, no matter if the need seems unsurmountable or if the need seems trivial, that member can ask the SOLACE network for assistance.

Examples of “Nothing too big” include:

- A solo practitioner in Louisiana lost everything in a fire. This lawyer contacted SOLACE. An e-mail went out to the SOLACE membership at 6:18 p.m. on a Saturday asking for assistance. The lawyer in need sent the following message Monday evening, two days later: “The responses and offers of assistance from attorneys and judges have been overwhelming, and I am happy to announce that all of my computer and furniture needs have been met. I even had someone ask for my address so she could send a gift card for an office supply store!”
- An e-mail went out to the Louisiana members of SOLACE at 11:58 p.m. requesting housing near M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston for a period of four months for the young SOLACE member undergoing treatment for cancer. The following response was received eight and a half hours later, at 8:35 a.m.: “One of my good friends and Houston attorney ... has come to the rescue for the patient below. ... Eds wife is a physician, and both of them go above and beyond ‘giving back.’ When I read your note, I knew Ed would help. He will contact the patient directly.”
- Within 24 hours of the date and time that a request for information about a rare syndrome was circulated to the SOLACE members, a SOLACE member had made arrangements for the family in need to receive a consultation (and follow-up treatment) at the Mayo Clinic.
- A single mother in Nebraska was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer. She wanted to take her children to Disney World while she had the strength. Within 24 hours of the e-mail asking for assistance, her requests were accommodated. Someone in the SOLACE network had worked for Disney, others in the network offered the use of their airline miles, others offered use of their vacation homes. When the person came back from the trip and e-mailed an update on her treatment to her friends and family, she ended the e-mail with a paragraph that led off: “Let me tell you about the lawyers in Nebraska ...” This mother was forever grateful.

And Nothing Too Small

SOLACE assistance is not limited to big-ticket-item requests. Most any request from a person in need is suitable for a SOLACE request. Zainey often tells the following story when he speaks about the program:

“One evening I ran into an attorney and his wife at a local restaurant. They had just returned from an extended stay at M.D. Anderson Hospital, where the attorney recently had a leg amputated. I told them about the SOLACE program and asked them if our fellow members in the legal community could assist them in any way. The attorney was gracious and stated that they had no

real needs; their children were grown and out of the house, so they didn't need assistance getting the children to school, household chores, grocery shopping, or any of the other things that SOLACE members and their families have provided for each other.

“However, after giving it much thought, the spouse of the attorney said that she had a ‘little’ request.

“She stated that they have a dog who is like a member of their family—and it is upsetting when they have to board the animal for two weeks at a time while the husband undergoes chemotherapy in Houston. She wondered if someone could care for their pet while they were away receiving treatment. Within minutes of the time the request was circulated to the SOLACE members, over 70 people responded and stated that they would be more than happy to house the dog at no expense to the family in need.”

Michael Kinney, the program director of the Nebraska SOLACE program, tells this story:

“We had someone in our legal community who was ill. We sent a SOLACE request asking for greeting cards to be sent to the person to cheer him up. Unfortunately, the person passed away shortly after the request. However, the family received over 300 greeting cards. The children of the member read every card and were amazed by the stories of how their father touched the lives of others. The children discovered stories about their father unknown to them before the cards were sent.”

Create a Solace Program

To find out if there is a SOLACE program in your area, or if you are interested in creating a SOLACE program, please feel free to contact the author at the email below or email Zainey (Jay_Zainey@laed.uscourts.gov). Hopefully you and your family will never need the services of SOLACE. However, by creating the program or joining an existing program, you will see what attorneys and other legal professionals do for each other in their time of need, and the e-mails will serve as a constant reminder that if you have a need, help is only an email away.

Many of the SOLACE members across the nation share Michael Kinney's feelings when he states: “You hate hearing about someone with a catastrophe in their life, but I can rest easier now after SOLACE because I know that SOLACE is out there to help them.” ☺



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