

Business Opportunities

LawWorks Helps Homeowners and Businesses Keep Philadelphia Neighborhoods Strong

For the past six years, a small community economic development project has been meeting a big need: providing pro bono legal services to Philadelphia's nonprofits, small businesses, and low-income homeowners. The project is Philadelphia LawWorks, and if our business is pro bono, business has never been better.

Philadelphia LawWorks is the community economic development project of Philadelphia VIP, the hub of pro bono legal services in Philadelphia. For more than twenty-seven years, VIP has been bridging the gap between legal services organizations and the private bar by referring low-income clients to private attorneys for assistance with a variety of civil legal issues. With almost 850 cases referred since January 2007, and nearly 13,000 cases referred to date, many area attorneys are already familiar with Philadelphia VIP. If you are not currently a volunteer, we could definitely use your help.

Despite Philadelphia's numerous pro bono opportunities, many transactional attorneys did not believe their skills matched the needs of low-income Philadelphians. That all changed in 2002 when Philadelphia LawWorks was created through a collaboration of organizations including Philadelphia VIP, the Philadelphia Bar Association, Community Legal Services, Regional Housing Legal Services, and other local public interest organizations.

LawWorks offers volunteers, especially transactional, corporate, and probate attorneys, the opportunity to use their skills to assist nonprofit organizations, community groups, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and homeowners.

Our nonprofit and small business client needs range

from simple incorporation, 501(c)(3) issues, and basic business counseling to more complex intellectual property, tax, zoning, employment and contracts cases. Homeownership cases involve clients that do not have current title to their homes ("tangled titles") or are facing foreclosure. Clients with tangled titles have an equitable claim to their home's title but do not have current legal title. Without title, the homeowner is unable to finance the property, enter into payment agreements for delinquent real estate or utility payment agreements, or obtain grants for property improvements. Left unresolved, many homeowners would eventually be forced to leave the property and the home would become vacant, leading to blight and other neighborhood problems. Volunteers assist homeowners to place title in their name through probating one or more estates, assisting with a quiet title action if necessary, or simply negotiating with the record owner for a title transfer.

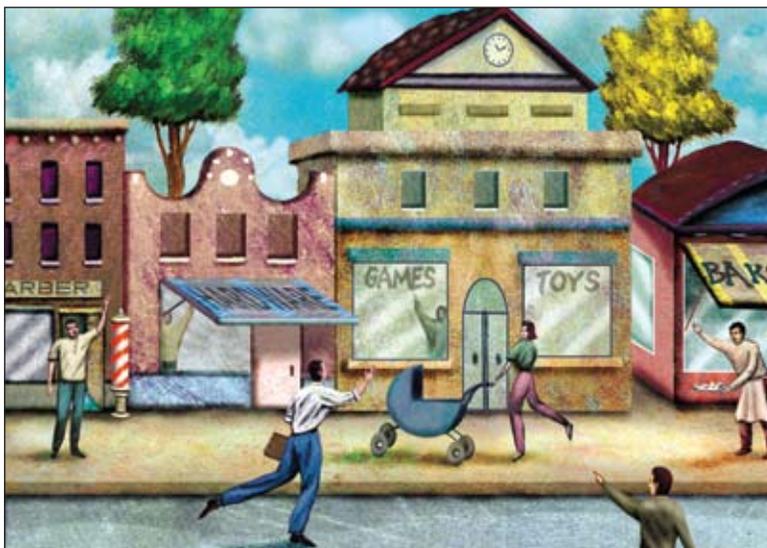
Since its inception, LawWorks has delivered outstanding pro bono legal services to clients. LawWorks staff attorneys provide substantive and procedural assistance to volunteers and also pair new volunteers with seasoned veterans on more difficult matters. We support pro bono practice

groups, where a cross-departmental group of volunteers at a law firm work on pro bono matters in a single subject area. To date, we have started four pro bono practice groups at Pepper Hamilton LLP, Reed Smith LLP, Dechert LLP, and White and Williams LLP, dedicated to homeownership issues. LawWorks also works with corporations and pairs in-house attorneys with law firm attorneys to take advantage of the resources of both organizations. Volunteers can also assist without even taking a case. LawWorks is always looking for attorneys to assist with outreach in the community and to develop self-help guides for clients.

One of the most unique aspects of LawWorks is the ability to provide pro bono legal services to for-profit business owners. How does a for-profit business qualify for pro bono legal services? LawWorks' small business clients are locally owned and operated businesses meeting a Philadelphia Bar Association approved income requirement. This income level is higher than traditional pro bono levels for individual clients because it takes into account the capital needed to start or maintain a small business. Our goal is to help Philadelphia business owners move away from poverty and toward a dependable self-sustained income source. Through the help of our volunteer attorneys, we are able to make this a reality. Volunteers' pro bono support of small business is actually support for the backbone of the neighborhood economy, which in turn benefits the entire community.

Perhaps the most popular way we are able to assist small business owners is through the help of in-house counsel at our annual small business clinic. This year marks the fifth anniversary for LawWorks' "Corporate Pro Bono Day" on-site legal clinic. Corporate Pro Bono Day is a results-driven clinic that incorporates a CLE training for in-house counsel volunteers as well as client counseling during the same event.

At the clinic, LawWorks staff works with a law firm to prepare a training focused on small-business legal issues to be presented to in-house counsel volunteers from local corporations. Our past law firm partners



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include Pepper Hamilton LLP, Blank Rome LLP, Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll LLP, and Duane Morris LLP. In-house volunteers come from large and small local corporations including PECO Energy, Comcast Cable Communications, Pep Boys, GlaxoSmithKline, Johnson & Johnson, Aramark, Legion Insurance, Triumph Group, Drexel University, and AIG. After the CLE portion of the event, the in-house volunteers are paired with a pre-registered small business owner to perform an audit of the affairs of the business and offer advice on other legal issues. The law firm volunteers remain to assist the in-house volunteers, if needed, with any issue-specific questions that arise, such as intellectual property or local zoning. Last year, more than thirty businesses registered for the event, a number capped due to space requirements, and thirty in-house volunteers participated in the training and client counseling session. It was the largest and most successful Corporate Pro Bono Day LawWorks has held to date. Volunteers counseled a variety of microentrepreneurs, including a clothing company, a wireless phone store, a clothing designer, a caterer, a photographer, and a handbag designer. Most of the microentre-

preneurs who attended were local minority and women business owners and operators located along newly revitalized commercial corridors.

Corporate Pro Bono Day 2008 will be held September 23, 2008, at West Philadelphia's Enterprise Center. This year's participating law firm partner is Dechert LLP. Community economic development starts by meeting business owners in their neighborhood, and since 2006, LawWorks' small business clinic has been held at The Enterprise Center. Home to Philadelphia's original American Bandstand television program with Dick Clark, The Enterprise Center has a long history in West Philadelphia. Today, The Enterprise Center pro-

vides capacity-building, business education and economic development opportunities to high-potential minority entrepreneurs.

Through the help of our volunteers, LawWorks strengthens Philadelphia's neighborhoods by supporting the organizations providing services to the communities, counseling the small businesses driving the economy, and stabilizing residential blocks by clearing up tangled titles. These efforts help develop economic wealth in traditionally low-income populations, contributing to a more prosperous Philadelphia. ■

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VOLUNTEER WITH LAWWORKS

If you would like to get involved with Corporate Pro Bono Day 2008, are interested in developing a practice group at your firm, or just would like general information about how to volunteer with VIP and LawWorks, please visit our Web site at www.phillyvip.org.

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