

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

MOBILIZING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR YOUR LEGAL AID OFFICE: CASE STUDY 1

An interview with Neil McBride, Executive Director, Rural Legal Services of Tennessee

When it comes to building an effective public relations program for your legal aid office, Neil McBride, Executive Director of Rural Legal Services in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, has one message for legal aid leaders: “You can make the media an important tool for your organization without having specialized training and without having to hire specific people to do it. It doesn’t take a lot of time to get most of the benefit of a public relations effort.”

“Just *doing* it—however imperfectly—will do a lot for your program,” he says. “Ultimately, the media attention one receives as the result of regular press releases may translate into increased funding from donors and higher levels of community support for legal aid services in your region.” As part of their advocacy, McBride believes, attorneys should consider the newsworthiness of cases as they are being filed and when they are decided.

“Press releases and any public statements about a case should focus on why it is important to the client,” McBride says, “not what the court said or what decision got overturned.” By focusing on why the case is important to clients, the statement will attract the attention of the reporter and, more importantly, that of the reader.

It is through coverage of personal stories—especially those of more vulnerable groups like children and the elderly—that the media and public will come to associate their local legal aid office with such all-American values as truth and justice for all.

McBride has conducted on-site assessments of legal aid programs on behalf of LSC, IOLTA funders and others. He has visited over 50 local programs in 15 states. During these visits, he often pays special attention to how the programs use the media. He has also participated in media training panels at regional and national conferences. From these experiences, McBride estimates that about 80% of legal aid field offices do not do public relations *at all*. He attributes this circumstance not to legal aid’s failure to appreciate the value of good public relations, but, rather, to routine apathy and, in some cases, caseloads that overwhelm attorneys’ priorities, as well as to a historic sense that “we should not attract attention.” Regional media trainers will need to be explicit in their preparation of press releases with legal aid leaders, if trainings are to be effective, he believes.

When discussing this effective and economical PR tool—the press release—in his trainings, McBride asks attorneys to think of the first sentence of a press release as the first line in their opening court statement.

“Advocates are often amazed at how the careful crafting of a press release’s opening—something so very simple—helped their overall presentation of the case to the judge and jury. Thinking about how your audience perceives your message is one of the universal truths of do-it-yourself legal aid public relations and, not so coincidentally, being a good attorney,” he says.

Controversy should be an ally—not a foe—when a legal aid attorney files a case and begins framing it for local and state media. In the past, some attorneys and office directors kept low media profiles because of worries over controversies. A proactive, engaged approach with media usually proves to

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be the best assurance of fair coverage. In RLST's offices, attorneys evaluate each case's public relations value before filing it.

One of the first things McBride does in his trainings is to present a legal account of a case and immediately ask attorneys to write a lead sentence for the press based upon it. The gaps between the legal description, the attorneys' press releases and the actual news accounts are often strikingly clear.

Next, McBride highlights the most common mistakes that attorneys make when engaging the media for their cases. Brevity is at the top of his list. Though eloquence may be an asset in the courtroom, for attorneys describing their cases to reporters, a well-chosen sound bite or a limited number of main message points are more useful to a reporter's busy schedule than a half hour of legal rhetoric. Using plain, simple language, not legalese, is another important element of attorney-reporter dialogue.

In their conversations with journalists, attorneys must reduce a case to its basic conflict, McBride reiterates. Restrict your discussion of a client's legal problems to those which matter most to people. Perhaps most important, legal aid attorneys need to learn not to overreact to media errors in reporting on their cases. Patience is a virtue when working with state and local reporters, he says, because they can't get it *all* right *all* of the time. Advocates should also not stop working with the media because of a mistake or because there was no coverage, any more than they should stop filing cases when they lose one.

Inside & Out, an effective Public Relations Program raises everyone's expectations

Illustrating a regional legal aid office's commitment to its community through newspaper articles and video clips should become an integral part of every society's public relations and development plans. Rural Legal Services of Tennessee (RLST) has realized its public relations strategy over the years by issuing at least one press release per month about cases, about changes in the law, and about legal scams and new rights.

For example, an RLST press release from May 2000 warns the public of the need to update their new addresses with the health department in order to insure continued health care coverage under the state's TennCare program. Attorneys from the RLST office are referred to as "health advocates" in the release and McBride urges public action by describing the conflict in simple language, "The problem is that if you have moved you won't get your letter and you may get terminated." At the end of this one-page release, people at risk are asked to contact either the TennCare offices or RLST directly for more information.

RLST's closest regional paper is the *Oak Ridger*, a daily. Articles on RLST cases have also run in two of Tennessee's largest papers, the *Knoxville Sentinel* and the *Nashville Tennessean*, and in numerous other state and local professional publications. RLST public alerts, profiles of honored attorneys and their professional speaking engagements are also fodder for local press and contribute to a sense of RLST's social engagement in the community.

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Although not ignored as communications tools, opinion-editorial writing, press conferences and meetings with local editorial boards are not given as much attention as press releases in McBride's offices because a far greater amount of one's time is invested in their production. These are effective communication tools and can help personalize relationships with regional legal and social issue reporters and editorial boards, especially when the situation allows for greater long-term planning by a management group dedicated to communications strategies.

Rural Legal Services of Tennessee also tries to maintain a collegial relationship with its legal aid neighbors in the state by sending them releases to modify and use locally. In addition, McBride includes news articles mentioning RLST cases in reports to funders. Besides promoting an image of social activism, positive news articles on a legal aid case raise staff morale, so attorneys can "send clips home to their relatives and feel good about being recognized for their work."

"A headline and article from a newspaper—even a small county paper that ran your release verbatim—means more to most readers than a typed summary of a case. For many readers, something is not real unless it is in the media." For that reason, McBride feels strongly that one of the most important values of RLST's collection of news articles is their use for recruitment. "Many law students say that the news articles about our work are what made them apply."

Over time, as an office's attorneys become more familiar with regional media, more articles on their cases appear. Attorneys carve a niche for themselves in specific areas of practice and a strong awareness of a regional office's connectedness with its community develops. McBride knows that planning RLST's communications program was a slow learning process since its inception in 1978, but the payoff has been immeasurable.

"The fact that we have a *pile* of news articles about us sends a clear signal that we are an institution to be recognized," McBride concludes. "More legal aid offices need to find their best media-friendly cases and begin planning a communications strategy. Though few legal aid offices actively seek press coverage, when they get it, they are proud of the attention. I hope that NLADA's media training can remind legal aid leaders of this feeling and show them how to build on it."