

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

OUTREACH TO FELLOW LAWYERS CAN BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT, VISIBILITY AND FUNDING: CASE STUDY 3

So you want to raise the profile of your legal aid organization—increasing your visibility in order to mine new sources of financial and community support—but you still don’t know exactly where to start. Well, according to two veterans of one of the most successful legal aid organizations in the Northeast, the best place to look may be within your own profession.

Jack Ward, the director of development for Greater Boston Legal Aid (GBLS) and Robert Sable, the organization’s executive director, have built a highly efficient support network in their metropolitan area by focusing chiefly on developing, nurturing and maintaining relationships with members of the legal community.

“It’s folly for legal aid groups to try to get support outside of the legal community without first securing the support within that community,” said Ward. “You need to be able to tell people that the legal community is behind you before seeking help from outside sources.”

GBLS has a unique and distinguished history in the legal aid field. The organization traces its roots to 1900 with the founding of the Boston Legal Aid Society, one of the first groups nationwide to recognize that disadvantaged people needed access to the justice system. Today, GBLS is New England’s largest legal aid organization, providing critical legal assistance to more than 17,000 low-income people in 1999. Such an impressive caseload could not be supported, however, without an ongoing effort to build and maintain public and professional support in the Boston metropolitan area.

While GBLS has capitalized on over a century of experience working with the legal community, Ward and Sable said that any organization should start out by targeting lawyers in their initial outreach efforts. The reason for this is simple: lawyers have an occupational obligation to help those less fortunate, and understand the importance of legal representation. “Lawyers understand that people need lawyers,” said Ward. “They can comprehend that the people you’re serving have no alternative.”

Sable recommended that organizations start out by reaching out to the leadership of the local bar associations—perhaps five or six lawyers who serve as the opinion leaders in their respective legal communities across the country. “These are people that will bring other people along,” said Sable. “Since they’re established and not politically vulnerable, they’re not going to be afraid that you will sue clients they may be representing. Partners in top law firms are a wonderful political resource to stand up and say that poor people have the right to be represented, too.”

In addition to the political protection afforded by reaching out to the legal community, top law firms can also help secure political support. Like many legal aid organizations across the United States, GBLS gets a significant amount of money each year from the state legislature through Interest on Lawyers’ Trust Accounts (IOLTA). Law firms and corporate counsels allied with GBLS will lobby the legislature on the organization’s behalf. Major bar associations will also chip in and issue formal endorsements for legislative requests on behalf of GBLS. And such endorsements carry a lot of weight with state legislators.

Working with members of the legal community has also enabled GBLS to establish a foothold in non-profit foundation circles, and raise the organization’s visibility in the metropolitan area.

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Connections to top lawyers in the Boston area enabled GBLS to begin a working relationship with officers of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay. According to Ward and Sable, the relationship opened doors to other funders, as the organization came to be recognized as the major player in the field of poverty law within the Hub. “We were able to tap into other resources through the United Way,” said Ward. “Your stature is already enhanced by the affiliation, and local foundations came to recognize that our work has a broader impact on the community.”

So how exactly did GBLS reach out to the community of lawyers and law firms in Boston? Well, the key to any relationship is establishing trust. And the key to maintaining it is communication.

GBLS was able to establish trust by involving top members of the legal community in their organization. A representative of every major Boston law firm sits on the GBLS board of directors. This relationship building has had a direct impact on fundraising, as GBLS board members are obligated to solicit their own firms for donations each year. Most recently, the board members have been making individual donations on top of those offered by their firms.

And according to Sable, giving is contagious among the firms. “Our experience has been that the best way to sell law firms as to why they should give is simply through peer-to-peer appeals—other firms are doing it and you should, too,” said Sable. “Once word gets out that certain firms are in it, they all sort of fall in place.”

Maintaining relationships with the top firms in town is simply a matter of communication. Ward says that the organization devotes a significant amount of time to maintaining a personal rapport with the firms—updating them on what the organization is doing, and how their donations are spent. Ward, Sable and a small group of GBLS officers will periodically pay visits to the managing partners at each of the major firms. Most of the time, Ward said, these visits are not for the purposes of soliciting more money, but simply to keep the lines of communication and information open.

Although GBLS does not regularly run public service announcements (PSAs) or issue press releases, outreach materials do play a part in nurturing and maintaining support in the Boston area. Ward and Sable’s advice for organizations preparing such materials is simple: just tell the stories of your clients. They regularly prepare a “fairly slick” annual report, a solicitation package with information on the organization and press clips about cases, and a newsletter three times a year. All of the materials incorporate the stories of their clients wherever possible.

When the organization invested in an informational video that targeted potential donors, for example, they included emotional stories about a Cambodian woman who was a victim of domestic violence and an elderly woman facing eviction. Like most legal aid clients, the two women had nowhere else to turn for legal help, and put their lives back together with the help of GBLS lawyers.

Sometimes, when meeting with a prospective donor, Ward and Sable will invite the clients themselves to come to the meeting and tell their own stories. “It’s a very effective tool in reaching people,” said Ward. “It’s important to put a face on clients’ stories.”

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Sable said that because of a changing culture, it is sometimes challenging to force a new crop of firms and lawyers to realize the importance of supporting and giving to organizations like GBLS. Many of today's newer firms regard themselves first as a business, rather than a professional organization with an obligation to the community around them. As a result, their charitable donations are often determined by marketing managers.

But Ward has discovered there is a way to circumvent lawyers chiefly concerned with the bottom line, and even reach the highest paid lawyers in the community. "You simply need to appeal to their sense of fairness and justice," said Ward. "You need to make it clear to potential supporters that you're helping people achieve what is rightfully theirs, providing them with what they've been denied. That is the key to any successful campaign."