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**Managing Quality Of Service In
A Large, Statewide Law Firm**

Deputy Director as chief administrator of a statewide program.

I came here in 1986. I have 17 years with the program. I was on staff then became a chief attorney, our term for managing attorneys, in northeast Maryland. In March of 1996 I became the deputy director. I have been in that role for seven years.

I am the chief administrator, the chief operating officer. I do not have a caseload. I have the following reporting to me: finance, administration (the plant), human resource, technology and the chief attorneys. I do the union negotiation. I deal with discipline, finance, grant application and reporting, data base management system and audits. I worry about filling positions and controlling costs.

The executive director, Wilhelm H. Joseph, Jr., Esq., is responsible for fund raising and public relations. Hannah E.M. Lieberman, Esq., the director of advocacy, works with attorneys on cases. She is involved in all appellate work. She co-counsels on difficult cases and appeals.

We are a well funded statewide program, one of the largest law firms in the state.

The Legal Aid Bureau has been providing free civil legal services to low-income people in Maryland since 1911. The Bureau is the only statewide legal services program in Maryland handling a full range of case types and services. It's the only LSC grantee in the state.

The Legal Aid Bureau is a multi-funded law firm with a budget of \$15M:

LSC = \$3M

State IOLTA and filing fee = \$3M

State contract to serve neglected and abused children (since 1982) = \$6M

The other 20% comes from 40 other sources such as counties, foundations, federal programs.

We are a major organization, one of largest law firms in the state. The only larger law firm in the state is the public defender program. There are about 250 staff in 11 offices, each covering one to four counties. We have 130 attorneys and 50 paralegals. It's a traditional program with a law office as the base model. Most service is done over the phone. We do some *pro se*. There are law technology centers in libraries and courts connected by phone and computer.

Intake is by phone. When you call in each local office handles its own calls and if the caller is in another service area they refer to that office. With the hotline for seniors you get service no matter what. Calls get referred to an office if it is beyond advice.

We are moving to central intake and getting a new phone system to do it. We will start with Baltimore. It will be able to switch calls among offices. There will be an automated call distribution system.

We do 70% to 80% brief service, and 10% to 20% court representation. We get 60,000 requests per year. Advice is about 35,000. Ineligibles are 10,000 to 15,000 and they get referral.

We have a state support unit. It helps local offices do their work. We have a director of advocacy and two statewide support attorneys, One does employment and public benefits, the other community development and housing development. Each office has a few impact cases. For example, if many tenants have a problem with one landlord we might do a group litigation. We look for this kind of pattern.

We are emerging from an extensive rebuilding period.

Before 1996 there were tensions in the program. In 1990 a union was formed and by 1996 there was no contract. There had been no raises in seven years. No investment in technology. Little retention or hiring of experienced attorneys.

In 1996 Wilhelm H. Joseph came as executive director. From 1996 to 2000 our focus was on getting the infrastructure in place and solidified. We addressed the issues of union contract, the raises, technology. The Maryland filing fee, increases in a state child advocacy contract, and fundraising gave us the money we needed. We had 50% raises in salaries. We purchased a new computer system. We straightened out our case reporting audit issues. Over this time the budget increased from \$8M to \$15M. Today the infrastructure is strong, confidence is high, and we are attracting talent.

The future direction of the organization's performance is the responsibility of me, Wilhelm Joseph, and Hannah Lieberman. At this point and in this economy, growth is not a strategic priority. Our agenda is to hold on to our current funding levels and to improve quality.

We are entering a period where our focus will be on improving service quality.

Now comes the hard part. With the infrastructure in place we are now emphasizing quality. That will involve training, evaluation and practice management systems.

It's our intent to increase staff development from the secretaries up to the managers. We do attorney training now. We have sent attorneys to a program where they get 6-9 days of intensive trial training. We need more training at the mid level. It's our intent to focus on management evaluation beyond the annual reviews done by Hannah Lieberman. To that end we have put in place a new practice management system.

We had used Kemp's "Clients for Windows" up to 1997. Kemp's was not robust enough for a statewide program. The functionality we needed was practice management, not just data. So we went to a system that increases the quality of the product and makes it easier to do the work. It facilitates work with capabilities such as the document preparation system and the ability to review cases on line. This system helps with the work itself. There is document assembly and retrieval, issue spotting and flagging. I can look across the program and see what is happening. It also tracks cases, case benefits and case outcomes. The name of the system is "Practice Manager" by RealLegal. It cost us about \$200,000 to bring it in and convert to it. (That does not include the cost of the wide area network we already had in place.) The on-going cost is about \$25,000/year.

The structure for managing quality is in place, the methods are being developed.

John Tull did a statewide evaluation in 1998 and we used Tull's evaluation to identify areas to improve. I believe at the stage we are in we do not need formal evaluation of the program. What we need is to develop our expertise in quality management, in technology management. These are not areas we are trained in. We learn as we move along.

I have the structure of evaluation needed for management of quality, but have not yet developed the formal methods and systems. For example, Hannah does evaluation of supervisors (chief attorneys and supervising attorneys). There is a form, Hannah has a method, there is a required schedule for assessment. We have done the ground work. We, as a management team, have not yet spelled out the factors to be assessed and the formal method. This is an example of one piece of our evaluation system that is not formalized. Also we have not laid out all the pieces of an evaluation system and decided how to use them together as one system.

We have a system in place to assure quality and it is a work in progress. We have forms to use in evaluating staff attorneys, supervisors have a schedule to follow, part of evaluation is generating staff work plans, I spot check results.

We see management of quality as relationship-based with evaluation in the background and often informal.

My style is "walking around" and relationship-based. The system is in the background. I don't want an approach that endangers relationships with attorneys. A parallel danger is being passive to "avoid conflict." So we put in place an evaluation mechanism that has the back and forth dialogue of a relationship. We learn how to maintain trust while enforcing the rules, a balancing that leads to quality improvement.

The heart of our quality management is the law practice system and the staff performance reviews.

Context for reviewing performance. We do a bi-weekly news sheet, "what's going on." We did this initially for rumor control in what had been an atomized program vulnerable to rumor. The

news conveyed is both social and about the work. It covers parties, cases, what the director is doing, what's happening in legal aid nationally. We talk about what we are doing beyond case work. Now we see that the context it creates makes reporting easier. We can reflect on what we are doing. We can ask, where are we in education?

Supervisory review and review of supervisors.—We have 30 supervisors (chief attorneys and supervising attorneys) in the program. In the big offices we have a chief attorney over supervisors. A supervisor is responsible for six people. The chief attorneys evaluate each attorney on their work and the office on the impact work it generates.

Hannah E.M. Lieberman, Esq., director of advocacy, does a comprehensive evaluation of legal work annual. She samples files of supervisors. The supervisors are expected to sample staff files. She does it for offices and supervisors. It is an evaluation tool. It works because of her dedication and ability.

Hannah's evaluations are input into the evaluation of supervisors done by me and Wilhelm. We build on it. I look at files, at the data and the notes. This process is important. In the past we found offices hadn't closed cases in ten years. We discovered malfeasance in a couple of attorneys. We had to jump in and correct the situation. We now require supervisors to do random reviews and annual performance reviews.

We want to strengthen the quality of management. We have made some managers go back to being staff attorneys. They are happier in that professional role. They didn't really want to be managers. We have a senior attorney position with a good salary to have room for advancement.

I have a good feel for what staff are doing and how well they are doing. I talk to each supervisor every week or other week. The process does not generate a "quality report" by attorney. I don't get anything like that. I talk to supervisors about staff.

We have terminated people on quality issues. It's one or two a year at most. Over six years, 6 to 8 attorneys were let go. Only two were serious malpractice level issues. We have a tougher 6 month probation period for new hires that prevents problems in the long run.

Case monitoring. For quality evaluation a strong area is our ability to keep a close eye on what comes in and out. We can see cases opened, cases closed and what's done in them, what's being recorded. I see all of it. I see the whole picture. I can reflect on it to executives, managers and staff. I see and know case loads. When staffing an office I look at case loads.

We do not look at the productivity data per attorney. There is no report on attorney productivity for the supervisors. Supervisors don't look at a monthly case report for example. The new system would help do that. We do not prescribe caseload targets or standards. We work with what's reasonable.

As a program our evaluation strength is in quality management.

If another program was going to look at us as a model I would show the practice management systems we have set up and have our staff describe the support they get to do the work. This all works because of technology advances, central reporting and staff cooperation.

In John Tull's list of Quality Management tools I think we have the law practice system elements with a few exceptions. The Quality/Quantity Committee is interesting and something I hadn't thought of. "Benchmarks" is something we don't do.

We are on target with the Staff Performance Reviews. We do everything listed except "rounds" and "after care" service. There is a "rounds" like activity. Each office has regular meetings where cases are presented. It's not for performance evaluation, it's more for education and case decision.

We are not strong in outcome evaluation techniques. In assessing quality of attorney work a question is how far outside do we go in looking at performance. We have no formal processes or methods for looking at service quality in terms of outcome evaluation techniques.

Case outcome data is required by funders but is not yet an important part of quality management. We have so many grants that we are constantly audited and evaluated by outside organizations. I do most of the reporting for grants. The state funder requires that we use Ken Smith's case closure codes on outcomes. We asked people to produce the Ken Smith data and it can be hard to get people to do it. There is also a part of our philosophy that resists reporting outcome. For example, we may take cases we can't win because everyone needs representation. Reporting may show us losing cases. I need to be stricter. The state program requires it and other funders want it. It is easy to do a closing code.

We do not do a whole lot with the outcome data. The data analysis for the program is done by me. It's just me. It was hard in the old system. It's easier in the new. Therefore I can transition the data management activities from me to technical people. That should increase its use. "Practice Manager" is limited in the reports it produces. We are using a reporting software with it that is easy to use. It will set up reports using any data in the system. So we can go from domestic cases by attorney to people served by zip code. This will soon be available to all supervisors.

Client satisfaction is beginning to be tracked. We do client satisfaction for *pro bono* clients, *pro se*, the senior hot line. It's required by Title IIIB, senior grants, and the state funder. The approach is anecdotal. The client writes comments on a form we send. There is no data processing or analysis behind it.

I review the results for specific issues. If there is a complaint I follow through. This process is rehabilitative in spirit and it is promotional. We use quotes from the surveys in the bi-weekly news and annual reports. They can boost morale.

We need to beef up client satisfaction. We don't have it for the meat and potatoes representation.

Judge and bar feedback is informal. Instead of formal surveys, we get informal feedback. Management gets to know the judges and the bar. We do not survey judges on their perception of attorney and program performance. Judges' satisfaction is touchy. That conversation can undermine the status of the attorney.

A new process to assess access is being put in place. There is an interesting process underway to look at access by county. The Maryland Court of Appeals passed a new rule requiring each county to have a committee look at the availability of legal services and to recommend how to increase *pro bono* to meet the need. We have voluntary *pro bono* with mandatory reporting. Our attorneys will be involved in that process.

Evaluation does not play a big role in resource development. Fund raising is relationships and grants are a process. We use program data and the client success stories in both but do not rely on formal evaluation.

Raising money is Wilhelm Joseph's responsibility. We have been successful. We are the base civil program and are recognized as such by the Maryland State Legal Services Program that administers IOLTA and filing fee money. Chief Judge Robert Bell provided resources for legal services to make up the IOLTA revenue fall off when interest rates fell. Wilhelm and he meet regularly and Wilhelm serves on many of the commissions set up by the chief judge.

Wilhelm set up the Equal Justice Council. It is made up of private attorneys and they do fund raising for the program. Contributions went from \$5,000 in 1995 to \$500,000 in 2002. They also help lobby and put in place the filing fee.

Public relations is becoming more important and it uses success stories. Our public relations capacity is growing. We have a new director of communications. We use media as a type of advocacy for client issues. We have a quarterly external publication and we do an annual report. They are used as public relations documents. We are becoming very aggressive about press releases and local TV.

The future of evaluation for us is in developing tools for managing the quality of attorney work.

Going into the future, the big questions we have are about how we manage. How are we structured at the top? How should we look at the individual offices? An issue for me is: for the more centralized functions how do we manage quality? I am evaluating a system I am not professionally trained in, such as finance.

We need more mechanisms to spot and attack problems as they occur. The supervisory staff needs to see issues as the work unfolds. We need to develop tools for them. In the past we created tools for planning ... "by month three do x, y, z." Now we need tools for managing quality and improvement. For example, in February we will have a supervisors retreat. It will include training in the management of quality. They will be taught techniques like staff interviewing and critical incident methods.

I want more management tools. And not just legal services specific tools. I am not sure what questions to ask: is it individual development, office development, central administrative staff development? How do we evaluate quality of the different functions and roles?

Developing people who can do quality work is part of our mission. One of our responsibilities is to send out good lawyers into the private sector. We are doing staff development to develop good attorneys and paralegals. Good attorneys become good judges. Good legal service attorneys can become private attorney champions. We have good experience in this area. So the private bar supports us.

I see quality management focusing on two dimensions: “quality of staff abilities” and the “local office serving the community on its issues and needs.” It’s all about meeting the needs of the individual in the community.