

At White House, Whitfield Describes Valley's Legal Aid Woes and Heroes

by Dawn Chase

Blue Ridge Legal Services Executive Director John E. Whitfield lauded the community spirit of Shenandoah Valley bar associations but underscored the dire condition of legal aid funding, in a presentation at the White House on April 17.

Whitfield was one of six legal aid directors invited to speak about the state of civil legal assistance in a program co-sponsored by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) and the White House. President Obama made a brief appearance at the program. He said civil legal assistance to the poor is “central to our notion of equal justice under the law.”

Blue Ridge's funding has fallen by twenty percent in the last two years. Whitfield said the program was hit by a “double whammy — collapsing IOLTA revenue and federal funding cuts.” Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts contributions declined with the housing market and interest rates, and in the fall of 2011 Congress significantly cut LSC's budget, which supports civil legal assistance to low-income Americans. Blue Ridge is one of six Virginia programs that receives LSC grants.

Blue Ridge came into the recession with only a few employees in each of its four offices, in Winchester, Harrisonburg, Lexington, and Roanoke. “They're dedicated, hardworking, smart. They're doing great legal work,” he said.

In the last eighteen months, however, the program had to lay off 26 percent of its employees. “We're trying to keep those four offices open, but they're only going to be skeletally staffed, with just two or three people in each office. We've lost all benefit of economy of scale, and that's really frustrating. Our costs per case have gone up, because we have to keep the lights on. We still have to maintain the office, with half as many attorneys in some of the offices.

“In the meantime our poverty population has increased 42 percent. We're focusing on the most urgent cases, ... but we're forced to turn away two or three times as many as we help.”

Whitfield said that in the face of these “crippling statistics,” one support stands stalwart — a “strong culture of nurturing pro bono” by the Valley's local bar, led by the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association. The HRBA's pro bono



referral program accepts 130 to 140 cases a year, including difficult cases and appeals, and distributes them among 170 private lawyers. Since the Harrisonburg-Rockingham pro bono referral program began in 1982, volunteer attorneys have handled more than 2,700 cases and spent 22,000 hours on those cases — a contribution of \$3.2 million at a modest billing rate of \$150 per hour.

The bar association's pro bono program is still flourishing thirty years later, Whitfield said. Eighty-five percent of the HRBA's firms and solo practitioners have been involved in an active pro bono case in the last eighteen months.



Richardson Receives Norfolk & Portsmouth Bar Association's Eggleston/I'Anson Professionalism Award

Virginia Beach attorney John Y. Richardson Jr. was recently named the recipient of the Norfolk & Portsmouth Bar Association's Eggleston/I'Anson Professionalism Award. The award was presented at the association's annual dinner on May 8, 2012. At the same event, Andrew R. Fox was presented the Walter E. Hoffman Award for Community Service.