

Local Musicians, Artists Soon Will Have Legal Outlet

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Musicians and artists in the Memphis area are now able to seek legal help through a new partnership among the [Memphis Music Foundation](#), [ArtsMemphis](#), [Memphis Area Legal Services Inc.](#) and others.

The Memphis Area Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (MAVLA) met for the first time about three weeks ago, said Memphis Music Foundation President Dean Deyo, and the wheels have been spinning ever since.

Linda Warren Seely, director of pro bono projects for MALS, has offered to help the startup project and already has referred one client, an urban hip-hop group, to a local attorney for advice. Seminars and workshops are also planned to help local artists and musicians.

The music foundation already provides many services to local musicians, including help with health care, licensure, and the Memphis Ambassador program, which brings Memphis artists to festivals and other gatherings around the country.

On Jan. 6, the groups will meet at the Memphis Music Foundation's Memphis Music Resource Center to form an advisory board and, Deyo said, possibly to put together the first seminar or workshop-type event for local artists.

Hitting the right note

The MAVLA project has been a long time coming.

"We had for some time here at the resource center (seen) legal questions come up for artists, particularly young artists who are starting out and don't have the background in that," Deyo said. "And so we were always calling on someone who we knew, a lawyer or someone, to assist."

Other music hubs such as Austin, Texas, New Orleans, Chicago and Nashville have similar programs, and Deyo did some investigating.

"I made a trip to (New Orleans and) Nashville and met with the groups there and just decided that this was something we wanted to do ... and then we discovered there were other people working on it too that thought it was a good idea," Deyo said.

A couple of those people include Seely and Kevin MacKinnon, associate general counsel for ServiceMaster. While living in Chicago, MacKinnon helped form a similar organization for musicians and other artists.

MacKinnon was out of town and not able to be reached by press time. Deyo did say that he had volunteered to be on MAVLA's advisory board.

Also, [Casey Gill](#), the executive director of the Nashville-based Tennessee Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (TVLA), came to Memphis and helped the group jump start their operation – even giving them TVLA's operation manual and client forms.

Marching right along

Many artists need simple answers to questions, Deyo said.

“One of the things that we recommend here is when groups are starting out, that they have some very simple form of band agreement,” he said, noting that band members especially should determine who owns what – not just equipment, but intellectual property too.

“Let’s say everybody wrote a song, and somewhere down the road, the band breaks up. Well, who owns the name of the band? Who owns the song? So every band – be it an orchestra, a gospel choir, whatever it might be – should have some sort of simple band agreement that’s a legal framework,” Deyo said.

“But then, as they’re growing as a band, there will be contracts that will need to be looked at; sometimes, if they’re going to play at a large festival or something like that, or if someone’s going to promote them or represent them – there’s all sorts of fairly simple legal agreements, but when you’re an artist or a musician, that’s not at the top of your list of things to do.”

Most of the time, artists need fairly simple consultations, although some issues may require more than a quick answer. That’s where Seely comes in, delegating clients to attorneys who can help.

Seely said she got an amazing response from [Sam Chafetz](#), the chair of the Memphis Bar Association’s business section.

“I said, ‘Sam, how would you guys feel about maybe working with some nonprofits?’ and he almost immediately e-mails me back and says, ‘We would love to, because we feel so left out of doing pro bono work. We’re transactional lawyers, we can help people with business plans, with business structures, with advising them. This is what we do every day, and we would love to have a way to give back,’” Seely said. “There is this vast group of lawyers who do transactional work and whose legal experience and legal knowledge don’t easily translate into doing legal services kind of work.”

Seely said by creating new volunteer opportunities this way, MALS also now has a whole new population of volunteer attorneys to tap in to for help.

Another plus is although many artists or musicians may not have the money for legal representation now, the idea is that with the right help, they will down the line – and when they do, they will hire a Memphis attorney.

“That’s the whole idea, obviously; we’re here for economic development, we’re here to grow jobs within the music industry,” Deyo said. “So if we can introduce you to a lawyer here in Memphis who’s going to give you a little free legal advice when you can’t afford it, we hope that at the time when you can afford it, that this is the person you’re going to hire.”

Deyo said the law firms also consider the artists potential clients down the road.

Natural evolution

Starting seminars or workshops also is a big goal of MAVLA’s, because many topics are ones all artists need to know about. At those, 50 or 100 people can hear the information they need at the same time, helping everyone.

But the referral process is integral to the program because the issues aren't always that simple.

"Particularly, we find in the urban music side ... it's not so strict and straightforward," Deyo said. "It's not so much, 'I wrote this song, here's the song.' It's more like, 'This person did this beat, and then we sampled this part of a song from 1996,' etc."

Although it may sound complex, an attorney with the right knowledge can usually provide a fairly uncomplicated answer to an issue that may seem problematic at first.

Seely summed up her feelings about the project almost instantly.

"This is just so exciting to me on a lot of different levels," she said.

Compared to much of the work Seely handles on a daily basis, with topics ranging from foreclosures to evictions to divorces, helping Memphis artists and musicians – and bringing in a fresh set of volunteer attorneys who have felt left out of pro bono work – is a breath of fresh air to her.

"Won't this be fun?" she said.

MAVLA will meet Jan. 6 at 4 p.m. at the Memphis Music Foundation, [431 S. Main St.](#) Visit www.memphismeansmusic.com for more information.