

MALS' Stature Grows Under McIver's Watch

BILL DRIES | The Daily News

Harrison McIver runs a well-known Downtown law firm. The name doesn't include any partners, founders or shareholders, though. It has a prime location a block from the Shelby County Courthouse and about three blocks from the Criminal Justice Center.

McIver came to Memphis 10 years ago this month to become executive director of Memphis Area Legal Services.

"We have a cadre of very experienced lawyers who've been here for a number of years. We've been able to attract a stellar group of new lawyers of less than five years experience who've come in and done a remarkable, fantastic job," said McIver, who came to Memphis from Washington.



Harrison McIver

Predatory concerns

In the last decade, McIver said individual cases involving family issues, evictions, landlord-tenant disputes and consumer contracts continue to be a large part of what MALS does.

But the nonprofit law firm also has taken on some larger issues.

"With the advent of cases involving predatory lending, or nonmortgage lending sort of issues, we've been able to adapt to the needs of those clients," he said. "With the subprime market bottoming out we are poised to assist clients who will face that currently as well as down the road. Because of our work in that area, we've been able to attract more money to assist us from various sources."

The agency has gone from a budget of \$2.1 million in 1998 to \$3.6 million now. And MALS also has developed ties with private law practices to extend its role in the local legal community.

"While we've grown our funding over the last 10 years, there are not sufficient funds to meet the ever-growing demand for services," McIver said.

That includes more bankruptcy filings as homeowners at risk by the subprime mortgage crisis seek court-ordered protection.

Memphis Area Legal Services attorneys handle about 3,000 cases a year that involve 8,000 people in the four-county area of Shelby, Fayette, Tipton and Lauderdale counties. It doesn't handle criminal cases and the attorneys are not paid by clients. McIver estimated there are 155,000 people who meet the low-income standards for services from MALS.

Desire for the best

Recent salary surveys showing some law firms paying first-year associates \$100,000 a year are not a realistic goal for the agency.

"We can't obviously pay our lawyers at that level," McIver said. "But we want to stay somewhat on par with the government lawyers like the public defenders' office. ... We've started a pension since I've been here but we need to grow that. It's insufficient."

McIver, a Morehouse College and Rutgers School of Law graduate, began his career working with North Mississippi Rural Legal Services. He later became managing attorney at Southwest Mississippi Legal Services

in McComb before returning to manage the North Mississippi Rural Legal Services office in Clarksdale.

He was executive director of Central Mississippi Legal Services in Jackson before moving to Washington to head the Project Advisory Group, a national organization of legal services programs.

"I call myself a lifer," McIver said, referring to his experience with rural and urban legal services agencies.

While the clients may be financially strapped, McIver said Memphis Area Legal Services is striving to stay on top of the technological leaps that are changing the practice of law for all. And the organization is seeking the best and most innovative minds coming out of the nation's law schools.

"Notwithstanding our being a not-for-profit law firm, we should provide the same quality service that any of the best law firms in the city or in this country should provide," McIver said. "That's my commitment. That's my desire."