

Lawyers urged to perform more free work for disadvantaged Holder stresses need for pro bono policies at TBA, legal aid lunch

By Maria Burnham

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Continuing a challenge issued two years ago, Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Janice Holder urged local law firms Tuesday to develop pro bono policies that encourage their lawyers to meet state expectations of volunteerism.

These policies already should exist or at the very least be in the works, she said at a luncheon co-hosted by the Tennessee Bar Association and legal aid organizations.

"No one in this room needs to be reminded of the importance of giving access to those who cannot afford legal services," Holder said.

While the six firms present Tuesday -- Wyatt Tarrant & Combs; Wolff Ardis; Harris Shelton Hanover Walsh; Husch & Eppenberger; Thomason, Hendrix, Harvey, Johnson & Mitchell; and Norfleet & Fletcher -- are already involved in pro bono work, overall participation in West Tennessee has lagged, falling well behind Middle Tennessee.

"It's clear we have to move from here and go out and preach the gospel of pro bono work to others," said Harrison McIver, executive director of the nonprofit Memphis Area Legal Services (MALS).

Lawyers are not required to donate time or money for volunteer legal services, but the state Supreme Court strongly recommends under its Rules of the Court that lawyers donate a minimum of 50 hours a year.

Most pro bono work is funneled through agencies like MALS and the Community Legal Center, which help the poor and elderly with everything from divorces and wills to landlord-tenant litigation and consumer complaints.

Supreme Court justices have been speaking at similar luncheons statewide, working toward their goal -- first expressed by Chief Justice Frank Drowota two years ago -- of having every law firm in the state establish a pro bono policy.

Lawyers have an obligation and a responsibility to give back to the community and to ensure the legal system works for everyone, including the disadvantaged, said John Blackenship, chair of the Tennessee Bar Association's Access to Justice program.

"We need to answer the call that's been laid down by our state's highest court."

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