MAL S Capital Drive Under Way

By Andy Meek

Memphis Area Legal Services Inc. exists to provide crucial legal help and representation to needy Memphians.

To keep doing that in the face of continued funding cuts and a consistently full caseload, though, the organization has decided it could use a little help of its own.

MAL S this summer launched a capital drive under the tagline “We’re All In,” an effort that includes distributable literature about the group and its mission, a video prepared by Running Pony Productions and pro bono marketing and related help from RedRover Sales & Marketing.

To underscore the situation now facing the organization: about 19,000 people called MAL S for help in 2011. The organization also raised a record $350,000 last year from private donations, but it still had to lay off staff because of congressional budget cuts that offset the additional funding.

That reality, coupled with the potential loss of legal services otherwise out of reach for low-income Memphians, struck a chord with RedRover, whose involvement goes beyond mere marketing help and direction.

RedRover managing partner Lori Turner recently joined the board of MAL S, and her firm is helping the “We’re All In” effort on a pro bono basis, with each member of Turner’s team donating their time to support MAL S this year.

“It’s just the right thing to do,” Turner said.

The “We’re All In” campaign is part of a multi-pronged strategy that will blanket the city’s lawyers and other legal professionals this year before using that as a springboard for a broader public awareness and fundraising campaign in 2013.

“We’re calling it ‘We’re All In’ because we think of access to justice as being a responsibility of more than just lawyers and the legal community,” said Harrison McIver, executive director and CEO of MAL S. “We all have a stake in having access to justice. That’s what makes our justice system work – people having meaningful access and being able to go to our courts and navigate the system. Justice is everybody’s business.

“The whole notion of ‘We’re All In’ can even be traced back to the preamble to the Constitution, when it talks about ‘We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union.’ And the first thing it talks about after that is ‘establish justice’ before anything else.”

Government funding is down from the national Legal Services Corp. by 18 percent this year, and if the current trend holds true, MAL S’ budget could be down by more than half a million dollars by 2014. As it stands now, MAL S currently has to turn away 66 percent of applicants because of lack of funding.

“We must help MAL S reduce dependency on governmental funding before our community is in dire straits,” reads a flyer that’s been prepared as part of the campaign. “And that starts at home – with you. With the legal community on board and ‘all in,’ we are in a much stronger position for a general public appeal in 2013.”