MAL'S History Stretches Far Back

By Andy Meek

Context for a capital drive launched by Memphis Area Legal Services Inc. to pull the organization back from the financial brink can be found in MAL’S’ history, including its formation in the wake of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Low-income Memphians needed courtroom champions and general legal counsel, and they still do. The organization currently is in a tight spot financially, though, which is the reason for its “We’re All In” campaign.

To underscore the situation now facing the organization: about 19,000 people called MALS 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.

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.

Attorneys and civic leaders close to MAL’S are warning that critical legal aid the program makes available to the less fortunate would be otherwise unavailable if the organization has to shrink itself much further – or worse, to close its doors.

MAL’S got started in the first place thanks to more than two dozen attorneys led by former Tennessee Attorney General Mike Cody, and in June 1968 the Neighborhood Legal Services Project opened its doors in the old Centenary Methodist Church on Mississippi Boulevard.

The early supporters pooled their money together to support, organize and staff the organization. It was not long before the group was being known as Memphis and Shelby County Legal Services, and Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr. and retired Shelby County Circuit Court Judge George Brown both served as executive directors in the early years.

“I was the first executive director – the first employee, you might say,” Brown said. “There was a need for poor persons to have access to justice and access to lawyers. And it was clear that access could not be adequately provided by just volunteers and just the bar association. It was also clear, once it came into being, that the need was greater than the supply of volunteer lawyers.”

The supporters persevered, and Brown said there were 12 to 15 attorneys on staff at MAL’S by the time he left as executive director in the 1970s. Congress enacted the Legal Services Corp. Act in 1974, which brought additional funding for legal aid programs, like the one in Memphis.

MAL’S later settled on its current name to better reflect its expansion of service into Fayette, Lauderdale and Tipton counties.

“Legal rights are such an important aspect of our country and our government,” Brown said. “The presence of MAL’S in a sense levels the legal playing field and makes sure the system works fairly for (low-income area residents).”

RedRover Sales & Marketing 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.

The 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.