Memphis Area Legal Services Relies on City’s Legal Community

By Bill Dries

The description of Memphis Area Legal Services Inc. as a law firm works in some ways.

But unlike conventional law firms, the attorneys work with clients across several institutional boundaries that might not ordinarily be part of the services offered by a conventional law firm.

And while those law firms compete with each other for business, the legal services agency relies on some of the city’s largest law firms as a front line of financial support during its annual capital campaign.

“We are not here to do anything but help make Memphis a better place to live for everybody. Justice is everybody’s business. We play our part,” said MALs executive director and CEO Harrison McIver. “We need the assistance. We need the financial support as well as volunteers to help us achieve access to justice and equal justice under the law, which is etched on the U.S. Supreme Court building. We are essential to that but we are not exclusive.”

The campaign with a goal of raising $350,000 has ramped up for a push to the Dec. 31 fundraising deadline. The campaign has raised $175,000 in pledges and receipts so far.

“We froze salaries. We froze other benefits like retirement,” McIver said. “We’ve taken very austere measures in order to keep the doors open and keep the services going without further reductions in staff.”

The organization has lost 10 full-time employees in the last two years.

“We don’t have a full-time investigator. So our staff, our lawyers, have to do their own preparatory work and investigations,” he added. “We don’t have the benefit of paralegals who are actually there. We have them during the summer. But I’m talking about full time where you can dispatch them to bring back information then.”

MALs has also supplemented its budget with grants from the state Attorney General’s office and the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Justice Department funding is for the office to work with the Family Safety Center on domestic violence cases. It will allow MALs to hire, or probably shift, an attorney to the case work. The federal funding is also augmented by funding from the Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis.

“If they get behind in their rent or get behind in their utilities, we have some funds that are made available by the Women’s Foundation,” McIver said. “It is those things that will help a
woman to become independent and remove herself from an environment where she was abused or subject to violence.”

It is one of numerous examples of the holistic approach to the practice of law Memphis Area Legal Services takes.

“We do have to look at each client in holistic ways. If you are homeless and you are about to lose your home, if we can stave off the foreclosure, we need to have education around how to budget,” McIver said. “It is how to make sure they pay the bills that are most significant, maybe give up the credit cards they have or not acquire credit cards. It’s that literacy training.”

The approach frequently involves a restoration or start of government benefits due a client.

“The work we do sometimes leverages dollars that have a positive impact on our community,” he added. “We preserved over $1.3 million in terms of restoration of public benefits. Clients spend that money in this community. So, it has leverage.”

And that is an economic impact that McIver said is a different perception than many have of the legal agency.

“I can tell you from our experience that most of the folks who come through these doors are desperate. They are at their 11th hour and they are really in need of someone to help them navigate their problems, navigate the legal system,” he said. “They are not looking just for a handout. They are looking for a hand up in order to be contributing and viable members of our community.”