

Senior Attorneys Fill Legal Niche

The Saginaw County Senior Circuit Pro Bono Bar is first of its kind in the state

By Naseem Stecker

He could have been sitting comfortably in a rocking chair, contemplating nothing in particular—letting time slip by. After 46 years of practicing criminal law, Saginaw attorney James Brisbois Sr. had earned his retirement. But an idea had taken hold of his imagination and would not let him withdraw completely from the legal scene.

"I was watching the Senior Circuit Golf Tour and it occurred to me that those people were doing what they liked to do and they were raising a lot of money for charity and still having a good time. I wondered if lawyers couldn't do that," Brisbois said.

What he had in mind was to provide free legal counseling for seniors. Brisbois decided to do some research and found out that there were 40 lawyers in the county who had over 40 years of experience each. "I sent a letter out to all the 40 asking if they would be interested in forming a pro bono bar association. I got responses from 12 people."

This nucleus became the Saginaw County Senior Circuit Pro Bono Bar Association on June 16, 1998. With a combined legal experience of over 600 years, the members are dedicated to providing legal counseling to those in need.

At 79, Brisbois is the group's oldest member. The other 69 members include retired, as well as practicing lawyers. Membership is open to all lawyers in good standing with the State Bar of Michigan.

While many senior attorneys are known to provide pro bono service, the Saginaw County Senior Circuit Pro Bono Bar Association is the first of its kind in the state and has been recognized as a special purpose bar by the State Bar of Michigan.



Founders of the Saginaw County Senior Circuit Pro Bono Bar Association (left to right): Robert Day, Robert Chaklos Sr., Jack Kerr, Charles Collison, James Brisbois Sr., Joseph Trogan, Eugene Mossner, and Len LeFevre.

Initial concerns about malpractice insurance led the group into negotiations with Legal Services of Eastern Michigan. The upshot was a mutually beneficial partnership. "We screen the clients, set up appointments for them, and we never have trouble filling a clinic," said Marilyn Hackett, pro bono coordinator at Legal Services of Eastern Michigan.

Once a month, two attorneys from the pro bono group devote five to six hours listening, analyzing, and recommending solutions to seniors. The Saginaw County Commission on Aging is also involved in this project because it provides the location—the Eleanor Frank Senior Citizen Facility where these free legal consultations take place.

Advice is sought on issues like bankruptcy, wills and estates, divorce, child support, transfer claims, insurance policies, and real estate. "It's an extremely vast range and covers practically every aspect of law," said Joseph Trogan, president of the Senior Circuit Pro Bono Bar Association. "We also have members who are experts in tax law, if

there's a tax problem. We have experts in almost any field and have been able to provide efficient service."

Feedback from the clients confirms this. In a client satisfaction survey, one woman wrote: "they listened carefully, quickly analyzed the situation, and offered practical answers in a difficult emotionally charged situation and courteously helped me focus and retain important information to hopefully resolve this matter." Another client wrote: "the consultation with the volunteer attorneys helped me to understand some of the legal aspects and answered some questions." Yet a third said: "I had many questions and received answers for each of them."

No litigation work is involved for the pro bono lawyers. If the case needs further action, the clients are put in touch with other attorneys to do the work. The pro bono lawyers concentrate primarily on counseling, clarifying the problems, and laying the groundwork to resolve the issue.

"These elderly people benefit by just coming in and expressing their problems to

somebody. In fact, they get to see their own problem a lot better that way," Brisbois said. "On a few occasions, we've had follow-up work. I remember counseling a lady over a fence dispute, just a few miles from Saginaw. I was out there at least five times to take pictures of the fence and to advise her about what to do and how to handle it."

Encouraged by their success, the Saginaw Senior Circuit Pro Bono Bar Association is expanding its services. In February, a second legal clinic was set up at the Marie Davis Center in downtown Saginaw. Trogan said the group is also starting to organize counseling sessions at low-income housing complexes to serve handicapped clients.

"We've contributed hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars in free legal services. There's substantial amounts of money involved that the public is saving through our services," Trogan added.

However, with expansion there are also more demands on time like setting up sched-

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ules, meetings, minutes, reports, and solicitation of members. "There's a tremendous amount of work outside the counseling. When we get to the point financially when we can get a secretary to do that, it'll make us more efficient and able to help more people," Brisbois said.

"Frankly, I think we've done a lot for image improvement—who can knock doing free legal work for people who need it?" Brisbois asked. "It's kind of like apple pie and baseball—everybody accepts it as a good thing. We've had people come up to us in the street and say they've read about our work and they think we are doing a great thing. So

it has got to reflect well on the bigger profession . . . I've been real happy and proud to be an attorney all my life and I'd like to keep doing it. And there's an additional benefit too. When all we old-timers get together for a meeting, right away the reminiscing starts. So that's a big benefit. It establishes a camaraderie of spirit and I think it helps us to do what we're trying to do."

Any group that's interested in organizing along the lines of this Saginaw association should contact Joseph Trogan at (517) 793-8400. ♦

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal.