

Legal Community Rallies To Soften The Blow Of COVID-19

By Michele Gorman

Law360 (March 25, 2020, 8:40 PM EDT) -- Each May, law firms in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region compete for bragging rights by gathering food, funds and volunteer hours to support the local food bank. But amid the ongoing spread of COVID-19, the legal community this year has become painfully aware of the immediate need to help.

More than a dozen firms and legal organizations have already started participating in this year's Food From the Bar Campaign, so far raising at least \$10,000 for the Capital Area Food Bank in D.C.

"As we all do what we can to 'flatten the curve' and support each other during this difficult time, we, as a legal community, are joining together to do everything we can to help all those in need now," said Andrew Cook, a partner at K&L Gates LLP who co-chairs FFTB.

Because of the impact of the novel coronavirus on the economy and businesses around the world, the Capital Area Food Bank can't count on the hundreds of thousands of pounds of food typically donated by retailers. Instead, the food bank estimates it will need to purchase \$2.7 million of food each month to make up for the drop in donations, Cook said.

In recent weeks, COVID-19 has caused businesses to screech to a halt and realign priorities, and has sent employees home to work remotely to prevent the further spread of the disease. In the legal community, courts are closing, law school professors are teaching virtual classes and some firms are reducing staff.

Despite the disruption in their own industry, lawyers, firms and legal companies have stepped up to lend a hand to their communities and vulnerable populations.

In D.C., Cook and the other FFTB leaders aim to raise at least \$400,000 over the next few weeks. Last year, the money helped provide almost 788,000 meals to children and their families.



A flat of food is rolled to a vehicle at the Capital Area Food Bank in Washington, D.C., one of several charities law firms are supporting to help with relief efforts during the coronavirus outbreak. (AP)

"Whatever you think you can afford to give, please give," Cook said. "We're fulfilling a very, very vital need."

The campaign is one example of how lawyers are helping. Here, Law360 looks at some of the other ways the legal community has stepped up to lend a hand amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

Financially Supporting Vulnerable Populations, Medical Staff

To help with the response to the COVID-19 crisis in China, the Morrison & Foerster Foundation and law firm employees have donated about \$45,000 to two organizations — the One Foundation and Project HOPE.

The foundation plans to make similar donations over the next few months to help those hit hardest by COVID-19 in the U.S. and Europe, including low-income families and students, homeless individuals, hourly workers, nurses, doctors and other medical and emergency professionals, said Jamie Levitt, a partner at the firm and chair of the foundation.

"This is a time when we need to pull together as a nation really in a non-partisan way," she said.

The foundation encourages the firm's lawyers and staff to donate to nonprofits of their choice. Then, using the board's discretion, it matches the dollar amount and gives to one or more organizations addressing the crisis at issue at the time.

"By being able to marshal both the funds in our foundation but then also motivate and encourage and enhance the giving by individuals, we're hoping to give back in some small way," Levitt said.

Since it began about 35 years ago, the foundation has contributed \$63 million to charitable organizations in the regions where the firm has offices. It has previously given money and matched individual donations to organizations during other regional and national crises, including family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border, the California and Australian wildfires, and the U.S. government shutdown, Levitt said.

Raising Money for Cafe Employees

Much like many educational institutions across the country, the University of Michigan Law School has moved to virtual classes because of COVID-19. As a result, the school cafe's five employees were left indefinitely without work.

Law professors Leah Litman and Samuel Bagenstos set up a GoFundMe page for the cafe's staff. In the past week, they've raised more than \$34,500 from at least 675 donations — surpassing their goal by a few thousand dollars.

Given the current needs of communities everywhere, Bagenstos said he didn't know what to expect. But the outpouring of support — hundreds of individual donations ranging from \$5 to \$500 — is encouraging and shows how much former and current students, faculty members, staff and administrators value the cafe and its employees, he said.

"I think it's our obligation as a community ... to help out everyone who needs it as a result of this," Bagenstos said.

Litman said she views the support as a sign that the law school community will be able to rely on one another as they face an uncertain future.

The catering company expects to rehire the employees once the school reopens, according to the GoFundMe page. But for now, most of the buildings on campus are closed, and all spring and summer term courses are set to be conducted remotely.

Educating the Public

Some lawyers' groups have created ways to help the public understand and navigate tricky issues that might arise as the virus spreads.

Member volunteers with the California Lawyers Association are producing short online videos about topics affecting the public, including employment and bankruptcy issues, according to CEO and executive director Ona Alston Dosunmu.

She said they also want to roll out videos about commercial tenant law for small business owners, as well as family law to help people determine what to do about visitation rights if, say, one parent has been diagnosed with COVID-19.

With the videos, the association strives to serve as an "information hub" to guide the public through scenarios that might arise, she said.

Once the videos are complete, they will be posted publicly on the association's website and on YouTube.

Helping Lawyers Navigate Changes

Legal technology company Clio is applying its mission statement — "transform the practice of law, for good" — to help the legal community through the COVID-19 pandemic by committing \$1 million to a disaster relief fund.

CEO and co-founder Jack Newton said he thinks the crisis will act as a catalyst to accelerate the technological and social changes in the legal industry that might have otherwise taken some lawyers five to 20 years to implement.

"The difference between law firms that not only survive but maybe thrive in this environment and those that fail will really be around how deftly they can maneuver the technological changes they need to adopt, and the social and the people changes that they need to navigate as well," he said.

For the past decade or so, the Canada-based company has provided relief for firms impacted by natural disasters, such as Hurricane Sandy in New York. Given the scale of COVID-19, the company is offering support worldwide through its new commitment.

The initiative includes four key pillars: direct financial assistance for legal professionals to offset the cost of subscribing to Clio to help with remote work; support with the onboarding and implementation of Clio; financial aid for legal organizations or charities providing mental health support to lawyers; and an educational investment to fund webinars, e-books and white papers.

So far, there has been "off-the-charts" demand for the content, Newton said. One of its first efforts as part of the initiative was a webinar focused on best practices for lawyers working from home. Clio announced the webinar on a Monday, and two days later, the company had more than 1,000 registrations, Newton said.

He added that most of the focus is on resources to assist many lawyers, rather than one-off engagements.

Clio is "trying to really create leverage out of that million dollars and impact thousands and thousands of lawyers with that investment," he added, "as opposed to only being able to provide direct financial aid for a handful of them."

--Editing by Kelly Duncan and Emily Kokoll.

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