

Volunteers help budding entrepreneurs through legal thickets

By [NEAL ST. ANTHONY](#), Star Tribune

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Marty Rosenbaum, a veteran Minneapolis attorney, remembers volunteering years ago to help low-income folks who couldn't afford a lawyer resolve issues that were headed for a courtroom.

Problem was, Rosenbaum is a business lawyer, not a litigator. He had little experience with eviction, family disputes or immigration proceedings.

"To do that work, I would need to tap into other lawyers," Rosenbaum said.

That's why Jim Baillie of Fredrikson & Byron and one of the deans of the Twin Cities and national bankruptcy bar, along with several other commercial lawyers, launched the Minnesota chapter of LegalCORPS in 2004.

LegalCORPS targets struggling nonprofits and shoestring entrepreneurs with veteran attorneys who help them form companies, get licensed, conform to employment or other laws, avoid litigation and other pickles. LegalCORPS is a pro bono conduit for smaller firms, solo practitioners and commercial lawyers at big shops who want to specialize in "preventative maintenance" with small-business clients or nonprofits who aren't yet big enough to afford counsel.

Rosenbaum has helped many neighborhood entrepreneurs, including one St. Paul woman with a knack for caring for the elderly who set up a small business that helps seniors live independently at a fraction of nursing home costs. Very satisfying, he said.

"We encourage people to set it up right and help them stay in business," said Rosenbaum of Maslon Edelman Borman & Brand. "This is preventative medicine. It gets more expensive when people have problems downstream and lawsuits often put people out of business.

"I volunteer [for LegalCORPS] at a walk-in clinic in St. Paul. I've seen the benefits. As lawyers, it's part of our obligation to make the community a better place. And this is also fun."

For decades, lawyers have volunteered through Volunteer Lawyers Center, the Immigration Law Center and Centro Legal. Many firms, including Lindquist & Vennum, Fredrikson, Faegre & Benson and Dorsey & Whitney, encourage their lawyers to commit 3 percent or more of their time.

The larger firms have pro bono coordinators who match talent with need.

For smaller firms, Legal-CORPS can fill that role. It is staffed by attorney and former journalist Michael Vitt and a part-time assistant and boasts about 200 volunteer lawyers around Minnesota. They staff walk-in clinics and offer nonprofit seminars and also work through the Neighborhood Development Center, which prepares fledgling entrepreneurs to open storefront cafes, craft shops, tailor shops, auto repair and other owner-occupied businesses.

"I sat down about a decade ago with Jim Baillie and, since then, Fredrikson lawyers have counseled more than 350 of our entrepreneurs," said Mike Temali, the son of an immigrant who has run the Neighborhood Development Center for a generation. "It's been very important to the inner-city economy."

Always room for more

Vitt said LegalCORPS has the capacity to handle more business. Nonprofit LegalCORPS operates from a small downtown Minneapolis office on a \$100,000 budget provided largely through contributions.

"The vast majority of new businesses fail, and legal problems or litigation is one of the reasons," Baillie said. "And resolving litigation may just prove to be a Band-Aid. A business lawyer can help you stay on your feet and feed a family. That's also very satisfying work for many lawyers."

LegalCORPS hosts walk-in counseling sessions in St. Paul from 4 to 7 p.m. every Tuesday at the U.S. Small Business Administration's Business Planning Center at 2324 University Av. W. and in Minneapolis from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month at the Small Business Center of the Minneapolis Central Library, 300 Nicollet Mall.

It also hosts counseling sessions in St. Cloud and Mankato. For more information see www.legalcorps.org

Some of these clients even grow up to be paying customers. This is a worthy lawyers' holiday!

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