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HCBA president discusses his agenda

by Minnesota Lawyer Staff

In a tough legal market, economy-related issues loom large

Editor's note: The following is the first in a two-part series in which Minnesota Lawyer discusses bar-related issues with the leaders of the two Twin Cities-based county bar associations. Next week: The Ramsey County Bar Association.

Though Bassford Remele shareholder Christopher R. Morris doesn't consider his specialty, litigation, "unique," he says it gives him a useful perspective as the new president of the Hennepin County Bar Association. He's tried a significant volume and variety of cases over the course of his career in both the Hennepin County District Court and the federal district court.

"I think I have an appreciation for the job the courts do, the need for adequate funding and the importance of maintaining a good relationship between the bench and the bar of Minneapolis," he says.

In fact, one of Morris' major objectives for his term is to continue building upon that relationship while pushing for adequate funding of the courts during a time of economic difficulty. Morris discussed these and other goals with Minnesota Lawyer writer Eric Berkman.

What is the most important item on your agenda for the coming year and how do you plan to address it?

Access to justice. We're going to address that in a variety of ways. One of them is continuing to encourage lawyers ... to volunteer their time for pro bono representation. Last year we developed a template for a pro bono policy that could be adapted for firms of any size. But we're particularly aiming at mid-sized firms that may not currently have a pro bono policy. And we're hoping that our template might make it easier for them to see how they can implement pro bono routinely in their law firms. And along with providing that template, we want to provide ideas and contacts for law firms ... to help them find a way to hook up with clients who need pro bono representation and to attend clinics that help those in need of legal services who can't afford it.

The other big project we've been pursuing for at least three years now is the "Call for Justice, a nonprofit LLC that we actually formed this year [to create a hotline for people who need immediate legal help]. ... The Ramsey County Bar Association and the Hennepin County Bar Association have jointly agreed to provide up to \$250,000 in matching funds [for the project] so long as we can raise that same amount of money from other sources. That's going to be our major fundraising project over course of the fall and into the winter.

What other major issues are facing your organization?

We've been worried about whether our membership will be affected by the economic downturn over the last year. But so far at least, the early results of the membership numbers this fiscal year have been very encouraging. It does not look like our membership is down, and, in fact, they may be up a little bit. ... [But] we'll obviously keep a close eye on the budget and make sure that we're a good steward of our membership dues.

The other big issue is judicial selection. ... Minnesota used to have some rules that were fairly limiting in terms of the kinds of things a judicial candidate could say in his or her campaign. The Republican Party brought a lawsuit challenging those rules and prevailed to some extent. ... Since that time, the legal community has been looking at ways to address the issue and make sure the judicial selection process doesn't become unduly politicized. A committee chaired by former Gov. Al Quie issued a report a couple years ago recommending that the state constitution be amended to replace the existing system of contested elections and implement more of an appointment-and-retention system similar to the state of Missouri. ... We are at least cautiously optimistic that the Legislature will authorize this year putting a question on the ballot in the fall of 2010 that would put this constitutional issue to the voters of Minnesota. Assuming we have success in the Legislature, there will be a huge public education component next summer.

How is the economy impacting your membership and how is your bar association responding to it?

We offered a number of CLEs free of charge last year. Those were very popular and we had very good attendance. We're going to continue to offer very good-value CLEs along with those free programs. I think membership in the bar association is of greater value and more importance in light of the current economy than it ever has been. And so far at least, though there's a lot of concern, I haven't seen the economic situation as detracting from the work the bar association is doing.

Christopher R. Morris

Employment: Shareholder, Bassford Remele P.A.

Birthdate: Oct. 10, 1965

Education: Harvard College, A.B., 1989; University of Minnesota Law School, J.D., 1992

Professional affiliations: Hennepin County Bar Association (president); Minnesota Defense Lawyers Association; Minnesota State Bar Association; American Bar Association; Attorneys' Division, ACA International

Community involvement: Harvard Club of Minnesota; Volunteer Lawyers Network; Coaching youth sports

Hobbies and Interests: Fishing and golf.

Family: Married (Sarah Morris); son, Eric (10), daughter Elizabeth (8)

What will your group push for legislatively in the upcoming session?

If there is a projected budget deficit in the state that requires the governor or Legislature to make some kind of interim funding cuts, we're going to have to be prepared to defend the judiciary as a co-equal branch of government and make sure its funding isn't cut any further. We'll also have our eye out for a proposal for a new tax on legal services. I don't know whether that will come up this year, but if it does, we'll address it and oppose that kind of legislation.

What sort of involvement does your group plan for the 2010 judicial elections?

No change from our past practice. We still have the Campaign Conduct Committee and it is presently inactive, but it will be ready when the time comes. We also typically conduct a plebiscite in election years. We poll our members on the candidates. We do not endorse any candidate — we merely poll our members as to what their views would be on the various races and make public those results to the extent that it's useful to the voters. But again, that's the system we are trying to improve and change. I personally think that contested elections are not the best way to select judges.

Minnesota now has four law schools. To what extent is the market oversaturated with lawyers?

My own view is there's not an oversaturation of lawyers. ... A law degree is helpful for any number of careers that a person might choose to pursue beyond the private practice of law. If the question is whether there are more law graduates in 2009 in Minnesota than new jobs in law firms, the answer this year is obviously 'Yes,' especially given the current economy. But I know that our law schools are not just locally based schools. Their graduates seek employment in a lot of places beyond Minnesota.

What concerns do you have about law firm layoffs and other signs that the legal services economy is troubled? And what do you feel your organization's role is with respect to such issues?

We've obviously had some layoffs in law firms in Minneapolis. Fortunately it's not been nearly as bad as the environment experienced on the two coasts. And ... I'm hopeful that the worst is behind us now at least in Minneapolis and we're not really going to see much in the way of further layoffs. I do think the bar association is a great resource for all lawyers whether presently employed or not, because it's a great way to network and connect with other lawyers in town. ... and if anyone is in a transition and needs to learn about a new area of practice, we have very reasonably priced CLEs. We also have a low-priced season-pass — the One Card — a year's pass to attend HCBA-sponsored CLEs.