

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
JUNE 13, 2011

**CHIEF JUSTICE THOMAS L. KILBRIDE, ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT
COMMISSION ON PROFESSIONALISM AND PEORIA LAWYERS
ANNOUNCE MENTORING PROGRAM FOR NEW ATTORNEYS**

PEORIA -- Chief Justice Thomas L. Kilbride announced Monday that the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism is teaming up with lawyers in the Peoria area to stimulate a mentoring program for newly admitted attorneys.

The Peoria program is part of a statewide initiative by the Commission on Professionalism to urge attorney groups, law schools and individual lawyers to take an active hand in ensuring that new attorneys get practical professional guidance after the rigors of law school.

The early years of legal practice are among the most challenging for most attorneys. Recent law school graduates generally receive limited practical and clinical experience while in law school, and the months leading up to their admission to the bar are spent in extensive preparation for the two-day bar exam, which consists of essay and multiple choice questions with no gauge of clinical or practical experience.

In such an environment, experienced attorney mentors can prove invaluable in helping recent bar admittees learn the actual practice of law, and get a meaningful start in their legal careers.

“My first years working as a lawyer were spent with Prairie State Legal Services, and while there was no formal legal mentoring program, the practical learning that I received from more experienced attorneys with Prairie State could not have been more valuable,” said Chief Justice Kilbride. “Not only did it help me, but it served justice by helping me help my clients better.

“It can be difficult for a new attorney, no matter in what environment he or she serves, to seek and find the practical help they need. By attempting to formalize a mentoring program here in Peoria, the Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, the Peoria Bar Association and the experienced lawyers willing to give their time will help bridge the learning gap between the academic in law school and the practical experience relied on in everyday law practice.”

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New Attorney Mentoring Program Add One

Jayne Reardon, executive director of the Commission, applauded leaders of the Peoria bar for embracing the concept of lawyer mentoring and recruiting experienced attorneys to participate.

“Lawyer-to-lawyer mentoring is a proven means of passing along the highest aspirations of the legal profession to the next generation of attorneys,” said Ms. Reardon. “Mentoring relationships cultivate a sense of pride and purpose in the practice of law, while conveying non-academic wisdom such as ethical and professional behavior, the skills of civility, integrity and inclusion and effectively finding a balance between one’s work and one’s personal life.”

Chief Justice Kilbride, Justice Rita B. Garman and Ms. Reardon also planned to join Bruce Smith, dean of the University of Illinois College of Law, later Monday in Springfield to announce the College of Law’s participation in the mentoring program. Mark Hassakis, president of the Illinois State Bar Association, also planned in Springfield to pledge the support of his group to the mentoring effort.

With Monday’s announcements, Illinois joins a handful of states with a formalized mentoring program.

“Over the last few years, I’ve noticed an increasing number of our newer lawyers are hanging out their own shingle—starting a law practice on their own,” said Karl Kuppler, president of the Peoria County Bar Association. “This program will be particularly useful for those who are out on their own—without support, without someone in the next office to talk things over. This program adds another piece to the informal mentoring that is going on in firms and hopefully will provide some much needed support for those who are not affiliated with any firm.”

Sonni Choi Williams, Peoria City Corporation Counsel and a member of the Professionalism Commission, noted that it was fitting to announce in Peoria a formalized mentoring program for new Illinois lawyers because in September 2003 the city was the location for the Commission’s first town hall meeting to discuss with local attorneys and judges what can be done to enhance the professionalism and civility in the legal profession.

“I was on the original Committee on Civility and our goal was to get rid of the perception that ‘Rambo’-style, take-no-prisoners behavior is an acceptable part of being a lawyer,” said Ms. Williams. “What I learned from Peoria’s and other city’s town hall meetings is that it is hard to un-teach bad behavior; but if we could reach and teach the young attorneys coming out of law school that this behavior does not better the profession, we have a better chance of changing such behavior.

“With the materials and under the plan prepared by the Commission local bar organizations can implement local mentoring programs that will not only benefit the profession, but also improve the public’s perception and trust in lawyers.”

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New Attorney Mentoring Program Add Two

Chief Justice Kilbride, Ms. Reardon and leaders of the Peoria bar believe that a change in Supreme Court rules covering Continuing Legal Education (CLE) for attorneys in Illinois will stir motivation among experienced attorneys and newly admitted attorneys to take part in a mentoring relationship.

More than 2,000 law school graduates are admitted to the practice of law each year in Illinois. There are about 90,000 licensed attorneys in the state.

Under new Supreme Court Rule 795(d) (12), a mentor and a new lawyer may each receive up to six hours of professional responsibility CLE credit upon successful completion of a pre-approved mentoring program. Ms. Reardon said that the Commission on Professionalism has prepared a CLE credit-qualifying program that will allow attorneys to engage in a structured mentoring relationship benefitting the professional development of both experienced and new attorneys.

“The Commissioners are excited about promoting the mentoring program statewide,” Gordon Nash, Chair of the Commission, said in a statement. “We are optimistic that this program, with structured interactions between experienced and new lawyers, not only will transmit core values to the newest lawyers, but also will energize and elevate the professionalism of the entire bar.”

Under Chief Judge Janet Holmgren, the 17th Judicial Circuit, which includes Winnebago and Boone counties, was the first jurisdiction to implement a mentoring program. Every newly admitted attorney in the Circuit was matched with a more experienced attorney. Participants were surveyed and outcomes were tracked upon completion of the first year of the program, and feedback from the project was used to provide a foundation to move forward with a new rule encouraging mentoring statewide.

The Supreme Court adopted the new mentoring rule in October 2010. Drawing upon the best practices developed in the 17th Circuit and the input of a statewide advisory committee, the Commission on Professionalism developed documents and aids to guide attorneys and organizations across Illinois seeking to undertake a mentoring program qualifying for CLE credit.

The documents include a comprehensive mentoring plan to guide mentoring pairs through activities and discussions throughout their participation in the 12-month program. What makes the program unique and flexible is its reliance upon local administration by organizations such as the Peoria Bar Association, law schools, and law firms rather than top-down direction from a statewide entity.

The Commission on Professionalism was established by the Illinois Supreme Court in September 2005 to help foster increased civility, professionalism and inclusiveness among the

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**New Attorney Mentoring Program
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lawyers and judges in the state. Formal establishment of the Commission was recommended by a Committee on Civility initiated by Supreme Court Justice Robert R. Thomas, who is the current Supreme Court liaison to the Commission on Professionalism. Justice Thomas was concerned that effective client advocacy had morphed into “Rambo” litigation tactics.

The Commission’s duties are defined in Supreme Court Rule 799. The Commission consists of a Chair, law school faculty, judges, lawyers and non-lawyers appointed by the Court to serve volunteer terms of three years.

No taxpayer money or general revenue state funds are used in its administration or operation. It is funded totally by a portion of the annual license fee payable by active Illinois attorneys.

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(FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT: Joseph Tybor, press secretary to the Illinois Supreme Court, at 312.636.0479 (cell); or Jayne Reardon, executive director of the Commission on Professionalism, at 312.363.6210)