



Supreme Court of Illinois

Joseph R. Tybor
Press Secretary

222 North LaSalle Street, 13th Floor
Chicago, Illinois 60601
Telephone (312) 793-2323
Mobile (312) 636-0479
Fax (312) 793-0871

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ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT COMMISSION ON PROFESSIONALISM ANNOUNCES MENTORING PROGRAM IN COOK COUNTY FOR NEW ATTORNEYS

CHICAGO – Illinois Supreme Court Justice Mary Jane Theis announced Tuesday that the Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism is teaming up with Winston and Strawn, the Chicago Bar Association, the Cook County Bar Association, The John Marshall Law School, the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and other legal organizations to begin a mentoring program for newly admitted lawyers in Cook County.

The announcement Tuesday continues a statewide initiative by Chief Justice Thomas L. Kilbride, the Supreme Court and the Commission on Professionalism that was launched in June 2011 to urge attorney groups, law schools and individual lawyers to take an active hand in ensuring that new attorneys get practical professional guidance after 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 them a meaningful start in their legal careers as well as promote principles that guide them toward professionalism.

"I am extremely excited to promote this invaluable new young lawyer mentoring program, and am grateful to the numerous organizations that have worked together to implement it," said Justice Theis. "It is a unique and beneficial partnership not only for those involved in the mentoring process, but for the greater public and for communities we serve."

Supreme Court Justice Anne M. Burke issued a statement in support of the Cook County initiative. "We all know that experience is our best teacher and this program will provide a solid foundation for new attorneys. This is a wonderful opportunity for seasoned lawyers to share their experiences with some of the newest members of our legal community."

MORE

Mentoring Program for New Attorneys

Add One

"The Lawyer to Lawyer program will provide valuable benefits to our young associates as they learn about professionalism and civility from more senior members of our legal community," said Paula H. Holderman, Winston and Strawn's Chief Attorney Development Officer. Ms. Holderman serves as the Second Vice President of the Illinois State Bar Association, and will become its president in June 2013.

"Likewise, it will give our senior lawyers an opportunity to share their experience, judgment and wisdom. Many of the lawyers in my firm have told me that they are especially gratified that the Illinois Supreme Court has seen fit to recognize their efforts to mentor young lawyers by giving professionalism CLE credits for the completion of a program that embodies the mentoring they already provide on a routine basis." Ms. Holderman said.

Chicago attorney Gordon B. Nash, who serves as Chair of the Commission on Professionalism, expressed appreciation for legal organizations that decided to start a mentoring program. "It is gratifying to see so many leaders in the bar associations and other organizations gathered today and signing on as willing sponsors of this mentor program for our newer lawyers," Mr. Nash said. "Collaboration with bar associations, law firms, and law schools is absolutely key to the Commission being able to accomplish its mission to improve the civility and professionalism of the legal community.

"This program will not only help individual lawyers, but it will strengthen the bar generally and will help the Commission achieve its goals of promoting increased civility, integrity and professionalism."

John Corkery, dean and professor at The John Marshall Law School, noted the law school's commitment in offering the program to its graduates. "JMLS is pleased to partner with the Commission on Professionalism to offer its graduates the lawyer-to-lawyer mentoring program to help their transition into practice.

"We are excited for those in our JMLS mentoring program and welcome the opportunity to network with program administrators from other law schools and organizations to share ideas and support each other moving forward."

Jayne Reardon, executive director of the Commission, applauded legal organizations and bar groups around the state for embracing the concept of lawyer mentoring and recruiting experienced attorneys to participate. "The ready willingness of the leaders in law schools, bar associations, law firms and other organizations to sign on to a program to support and educate the newer members of our profession as they transition into practice reflects the beginning of a real movement," Ms. Reardon said. "These mentoring collaborations will go a long way toward reversing the tendency of some lawyers to confuse aggression with advocacy and will reinforce the core values of our profession to serve the people of the state of Illinois with creativity, efficiency, and professionalism."

In June 2011, Chief Justice Kilbride, along with Justices Rita B. Garman and Lloyd A. Karmeier appeared in news conferences in Peoria, Springfield, Edwardsville and Carbondale to announce and express support for the voluntary mentoring program. Last week, legal groups announced their support in DuPage County in the Second Judicial District.

Under Chief Judge Janet Holmgren, the 17th Judicial Circuit, which includes Boone and Winnebago counties in northern Illinois, was the first jurisdiction to implement a mentoring program. Every newly admitted attorney in the Circuit was matched with a more experienced attorney.

MORE

Mentoring Program for New Attorneys Add Two

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.

Chief Justice Kilbride and the Supreme Court 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, and there are more than 90,000 licensed attorneys in the state. A class of new attorneys was admitted in May and about 2,500 are expected to be sworn in as attorneys November 10.

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 Supreme Court adopted the new mentoring rule in October 2010. Drawing upon the best practices developed in 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, law schools, and law firms rather than top-down direction from a statewide entity.

Supreme Court Justice Robert R. Thomas initiated the idea of a professionalism committee in 2001 to help eliminate a "Rambo-style, win-at-all cost attitude by attorneys" and recommended its status as a permanent Supreme Court commission in 2005 when he was Chief Justice.

The Commission on Professionalism was established by the Illinois Supreme Court in September 2005 to help foster increased civility, professionalism and inclusiveness among the lawyers and judges in the state. Formal establishment of the Commission was recommended by a Committee on Civility initiated by Justice Thomas, who is the current Supreme Court liaison to the Commission on Professionalism.

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.