

The cost of kindness? Nothing under the SOLACE program

It seems that bad news, natural catastrophe, and personal tragedy surface all too frequently these days. And given social media outlets, we hear about it in detail and immediately. These incidents sadden us, depress us, and sometimes leave us feeling helpless.

We can't save the world: true. We can't shield others from tragic events: true. But we can posture ourselves to respond to crises and help our own when disaster strikes. And that is what the MSBA's new SOLACE program will allow all of us to do.

SOLACE (Support of Lawyers/Legal Personnel—All Concern Encouraged) is an email-based network of legal professionals who are willing to provide critical assistance in various forms to other members of the legal profession in times of dire need or personal disaster. The SOLACE program was created in 2002 by attorney and judicial members of the Louisiana State Bar Association (www.lsba.org/members/solace.aspx). The program sought to provide a mechanism by which legal professionals could reach out in small but meaningful ways to assist fellow lawyers, judges, court

personnel, paralegals, legal secretaries, and the families of these groups when tragedy strikes. Other bars have borrowed and replicated this program, including state bar associations in Wyoming, Georgia, Colorado, Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Rhode Island. And in some of these states, there have also been Federal Bar Association chapters

participating in the SOLACE programs.

Examples of success in other states' SOLACE programs are impressive. In one instance, an attorney needed a liver transplant across the state, but couldn't survive the drive. Another member who had a pilot's license provided free air transportation for that attorney. In another instance a young paralegal single mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer; her wish was to take her two small children to Disney World before she died. One attorney donated frequent flyer miles to get the family to Florida; another donated use of his Florida condo for the week, and another donated a gift card for the mother to use on the trip. In yet another instance, a solo practitioner lost his office in a fire; the SOLACE committee sent out an email mid-evening on a Saturday night asking for assistance, and by Monday evening, the attorney had received donations of used office furniture, a computer, and gift card for office supplies that allowed him to get back on his feet quickly. In any of these instances, no gift was too small or too big—every thoughtful and compassionate gesture was just right.

After hearing directly from a bar leader running this program in Nebraska about the program's impact, the MSBA Council voted in its March meeting to approve implementation of MSBA's pilot SOLACE program. The SOLACE program will allow our members to connect and serve as a resource for others in Minnesota's legal community, its support professionals, and those involved in the administration of justice in Minnesota when they face some pressing need for help. Anecdotally, we would expect that there might only be three to eight requests a year, but this cost-free program provides an easy and timely mechanism to make a difference when it's truly needed.

There will be an electronic process through which individuals, or employers or co-workers who know of a colleague in need, may submit requests for assistance to the SOLACE committee for review and dissemination to members

if appropriate. (The program's communications seeking assistance will be sent to all MSBA members but will include a way to opt out of future SOLACE communications for those members who do not wish to receive such notices.) The types of assistance needed will vary, but in other SOLACE programs, assistance has taken the form of:

- finding medical specialists;
- sharing gift cards, airline and hotel reward points;
- housing issues;
- clothing;
- transportation;
- office relocation;
- travel assistance;
- cards/notes for the terminally ill;
- burial assistance;
- relief from natural disasters.

The SOLACE program will *not* be accepting any direct financial donations for individuals. Rather, a blast email will inform our members of a need, explain the situation, and allow members to "pay it forward" directly to that person if they have relevant contacts or things that could be of assistance to the person in need.

Bar members can help make the SOLACE program successful in two ways: (1) be the eyes and ears of the program—if you hear of someone in our legal community who has a need, please let us know; and (2) if a SOLACE request goes out, please consider whether you have a way to respond or, if you know someone who might be a resource, please help spread the word.

The MSBA is in the process of forming the SOLACE committee, making the request form available, and developing liaisons with other affinity bars in Minnesota to expand the SOLACE network. If you have questions or interest in the SOLACE program, please feel free to contact Tim Groshens at tgroshen@mnbar.org or me at soniamw@sapientialaw.com. Hopefully you and your family will not need the assistance of SOLACE, but if you do, this community will be there. ▲



SONIA MILLER-VAN OORT, a commercial litigator and trial attorney, serves as the president of Sapientia Law Group, a minority-owned and women-owned law firm in Minneapolis. Sonia also serves as the MSBA's first Hispanic and fifth female president.