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Counsel Who Care: How Attys Are Helping During A Crisis

By Xiumei Dong

Law360 (May 19, 2020, 4:25 PM EDT) -- As coronavirus cases have spiked, law firms across the nation have been stepping up to help, from providing pro bono legal assistance to fundraisers and donations.

Law360 rounds up some of the latest charity efforts from the legal community in response to the pandemic.

MoFo Partner Helps Launch Survivor Group to Combat COVID-19

Morrison & Foerster LLP has helped COVID-19 survivor Diana Berrent launched a nonprofit group to bring together virus survivors and connect them with professionals in the worlds of medicine, science and academia. The goal? Helping to develop treatments and vaccines against the virus.

Survivor Corps, which was formed on March 24, has grown to more than 45,000 members, comprising people affected by the virus and their supporters. The organization's initiatives include providing information, research and mobilizing COVID-19 survivors to donate blood and plasma in order to aid in the treatment of those currently infected.

Matthew Karlyn, a partner in the firm's technology transactions and life sciences practice groups, is leading the pro bono effort. In addition to addressing privacy, regulatory and intellectual property matters for the organization, MoFo's lawyers are advising Survivor Corps on taxes and other nonprofit issues.

"MoFo is proud to support Survivor Corps in its mission to stem the impact of COVID-19 and contribute to finding treatments, a vaccine and a cure," Karlyn said in a firm statement.

Crowell & Moring Works to Get Supplies for Health Care Workers

Crowell & Moring LLP has donated more than 300 N95 masks to support Masks4Medicine, an initiative that helps bring personal protective equipment to hospitals battling COVID-19.

The campaign was started by Dr. Nicole Seminara — the wife of Crowell & Moring counsel Jacob Zambrzycki — and her colleagues.

The firm's lawyers are also advising Garment District for Gowns, a nonprofit organization created to manufacture and provide medical gowns to hospitals and health care workers. The organization is made up of professionals in the fashion industry, including designers, product developers, pattern makers and sewers.

Garment District for Gowns' current goal is to produce 10,000-unit batches per week while expanding to other factories in New York City and Baltimore. The group recently received a nearly half-million-dollar grant from the state of New York to scale up production.

Meanwhile in Brussels, Crowell & Moring's lawyers are advising Gear Up Medical VZW, an initiative formed by two brothers — a doctor and a robotics doctoral student — to develop low-cost ventilators for COVID-19 patients.

Hall Booth Lawyers Host Virtual Concert to Aid Georgia Hospitals

Musically inclined lawyers and staff at Hall Booth Smith PC on May 14 hosted a virtual concert, called HBS Songs for Phoebe Foundation, to raise money for the Phoebe Putney Health System in Albany, Georgia.

The firm raised nearly \$6,000 for the Phoebe Foundation's COVID-19 relief fund, a nonprofit that supports the Phoebe Putney Health System. Lawyers and staff at Hall Booth contributed \$1,500 toward the fundraising goal, and one of the firm's clients, insurance company Coverys Inc., matched contributions up to \$1,000.

The one-hour concert included a performance from Atlanta-based partner John Hall, who came up with the idea from watching Elton John's iHeart Living Room Concert for America fundraiser for coronavirus aid in late March.

Bryan Cave Attorneys Play Online Bingo to Raise Money for Charities

Ian Weiskopf, a New York-based partner at Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP, along with his wife and friends came up with an idea to play weekly virtual bingo with families in their community to raise money for coronavirus relief charities.

The game has grown each week. As of early May, more than 360 families have joined them online. It also attracted local celebrities to play the games, including basketball player Sue Bird and Academy Award winner Natalie Portman.

Each week's winner gets a gift card to a local business as a prize, and the balance of the money raised goes to a COVID-19 relief charity. The online game room has raised more than \$33,000 so far.

Firms Partner With Local Officials to Provide Free Legal Services to Residents

A group of 34 law firms including Hogan Lovells, O'Melveny & Myers LLP and Larson O'Brien LLP have joined Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and City Attorney Mike Feuer in a pro bono initiative, LA Represents, to provide free legal services to low-income residents and small businesses facing hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The coalition, which also includes law firms, bar associations and legal aid organizations, is working to provide COVID-19-related legal services, including helping vulnerable tenants, domestic violence victims and low-income individuals with employment, consumer debt and bankruptcy matters.

Additionally, the group is partnered with Bet Tzedek Legal Services to build a support system for small businesses affected by COVID-19, assisting them with financial relief programs, residential and commercial lease obligations, contract enforceability, bankruptcy and other employment-related concerns.

Other legal aid organizations that are participating in the program include the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Public Counsel, Inner City Law Center, Neighborhood Legal Services, Los Angeles County Bar Association and Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

Similarly, in Arizona, Snell & Wilmer LLP, partnered with nonprofit Community Legal Services, has launched a Coronavirus Legal Aid Clinic to help address residents' questions relating to unemployment Insurance, the CARES Act and inability to pay rent due to the pandemic.

Firms Fight to Ensure Prisoners' Rights

Firms including Cooley LLP, Mayer Brown LLP and Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP said they are partnering with the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Washington Lawyers' Committee on Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and Families Against Mandatory Minimums on a project to petition for the compassionate release of elderly, ill or otherwise vulnerable prisoners as a result of COVID-19.

Lawyers participating in the Compassionate Release COVID-19 Clearinghouse project will provide free legal services for prisoners who are eligible for compassionate release.

Similarly, lawyers from Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP's Washington, D.C., office are working on a parallel project with the coalition — along with GW Law Prisoner & Reentry Clinic, the Second Look Project, Wiley Rein LLP, the D.C. Public Defender Service and others — to help secure compassionate release for inmates in D.C. who meet the criteria for the recently passed D.C. compassionate release legislation and who are at risk of contracting the coronavirus.

To date, GW Law Prisoner & Reentry Clinic has secured the compassionate release of one inmate, while Akin Gump lawyers are actively working on 10 more cases, the firm said.

Separately, Covington & Burling LLP's Washington, D.C., lawyers worked with the Council for Court Excellence to draft Section 305 of the COVID-19 relief bill, which allows prisoners in D.C. to accumulate time toward early release. The bill also expands the District's compassionate release program, allowing inmates older than 60 or who have terminal illnesses or chronic medical conditions to file motions for early release.

The firms' attorneys also filed lawsuits in California and New York seeking to improve health and sanitary conditions in jails during the pandemic.

Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP, Sullivan & Cromwell LLP, Latham & Watkins LLP, Arnold & Porter and Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison LLP also said their lawyers are working on securing early release for prisoners at risk for COVID-19.

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.

Correction: A previous version of this story misstated criteria for compassionate release for D.C. inmates. The error has been corrected.