

## Opening Statement

# WE GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

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Fifty years ago, four boys from Liverpool rocked the nation with a song called “Help.” Today, that tune’s refrain, “I need somebody,” applies quite aptly to a project named HELP. The ABA Section of Litigation is responding to that need. So can you.

The Homeless Experience Legal Protection (HELP) project was founded in 2004 by Federal District Judge Jay Zainey of New Orleans. The concept is simple. Volunteer lawyers in a community organize to periodically visit their town’s homeless shelter to provide pro bono services. All it takes is someone to recruit legal colleagues and a homeless shelter willing to provide a space for consultations for an hour a week, every two weeks, or whatever works. The results attained in these legal clinics are amazing.

“Mary,” a New York securities lawyer from a large firm, thought she could not be of much assistance when

she volunteered at a local shelter. Upon meeting client “John,” she learned that his road to homelessness began in San Francisco several years earlier, after being arrested on a minor drug charge. He missed his assigned court date, and a warrant was issued for his arrest. One thing led to the next, and there he was, homeless and unable to get a job because he could not pass a background check. Upon hearing his story, Mary suspected that the statute of limitations had long since passed, and called the San Francisco City authorities. After a brief discussion, the case was immediately dismissed and the warrant was recalled. That phone call changed John’s life.

Similar stories abound. Some shelter clients are unaware that they qualify for veterans or Social Security benefits. Others have no identification papers and no knowledge of how to obtain them. Such problems—easily solved by someone

with a legal background—often seem insurmountable for someone living on the street. The impact of such solutions can be life-altering for the homeless clients. The sense of dignity that results when a homeless client receives advice from “his lawyer” is difficult to describe. The change in body language alone is noticeable. It says: “Someone has listened to me. I matter.”

How are the lawyers who participate affected? One volunteer—a household name known for his high-profile work in the public arena—called his service at a HELP clinic the most significant legal work he had ever done. This from a lawyer who has seen prior engagements reported on the front page of national newspapers for weeks on end.

From 2004 through 2013—through his network of legal colleagues—Judge Zainey established HELP clinics at homeless shelters in 20 cities across the country. By August 2015, the Section of Litigation will have helped add 10 more cities to that list. Already, Section leaders have organized programs in Knoxville, Tennessee; San Antonio; Seattle; Tampa; and Portland, Maine. In 2015, Houston, Phoenix, Miami, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., will be added to that list. In some instances, Section leaders have joined forces with existing pro bono groups to establish such homeless legal clinics, and in others, they have called upon fellow members of the bar from their various communities to help the homeless.

The Section of Litigation is comprised of lawyers who have the power to change lives. Perhaps we cannot eliminate homelessness in its entirety, but together, we can make a difference, one life at a time. If you are interested in establishing a homeless clinic in your community, or in volunteering at an existing clinic, please visit <http://homelesslegalprotection.com/> or contact Judge Zainey at [jay\\_zainey@laed.uscourts.gov](mailto:jay_zainey@laed.uscourts.gov). ■