

Charlotte pro-bono legal program expanding focus in second year

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Body

Charlotte's Triage program designed to train corporate and private practice lawyers for specific pro-bono work starts its second year with more participants and expanding the targeted areas to include efforts that address human trafficking.

David Leitch, general counsel for Bank of America Corp. (NYSE: BAC) and one of the leaders of the Triage effort, kicked off the event Wednesday, saying in its first year, 97 Triage lawyers assisted low-income citizens in court cases or legal issues involving evictions, health-care access and criminal record expunctions. More than 170 people attended the event at The Ritz-Carlton, Charlotte and the continuing education sessions that followed in those three areas and the new effort to confront human trafficking.

Vijay Bondada, vice president of litigation for Duke Energy Corp. (NYSE: DUK) and another leader in the volunteer organization, told event attendees about the new group focused on human trafficking. It will be led Sarah Byrne of Moore and Van Allen and Sakeena Thompson of Wells Fargo & Co. (NYSE: WC).

Jim Sandman, national president of Legal Services Corp., was the featured guest at the kickoff event. He said that Triage's focus on training in specific areas that assist local agencies needing pro-bono attorneys makes the program a model across the country. He said the program concentrates on basic human needs - shelter in evictions, safety in human trafficking, health care centered on industry navigators for the Affordable Care Act and economic sustenance through the expunction of criminal records to reduce barriers for job seekers.

Also featured at the event was Ellen Fitzsimmons, general counsel for SunTrust Banks Inc. (NYSE: STI). She's slated to take the same role at the soon-to-be-formed Truist in Charlotte, if the merger of SunTrust and BB&T Corp. (NYSE: BBT) goes through as expected.

Fitzsimmons said that Triage is about ensuring access to justice for disadvantaged people. And, she shared a personal story that involved Charlotte. Her father, who had become a lawyer through loans on the GI Bill after serving in World War II, moved his family to Charlotte in the 1950s to start a practice. She lived here for the first five years of her life, and while her family was here, her father was part of a pro-bono team that overturned the death penalty conviction of a poor African-American defendant.

She also made a sly reference to Truist's pending headquarters move to Charlotte. "It was a slight downer when Vijay asked, 'Are you really still going with that name?'" she said.

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After the event, Fitzsimmons said she expected Truist would participate in the program, which was established last September by pro-bono leaders from BofA , McGuireWoods, Duke, Moore & Van Allen, Wells Fargo and Husqvarna. She said SunTrust has experience with a similar, but more limited, program in Richmond, Virginia, that served as the inspiration for Triage.

Leitch said afterwards that he felt Triage had met expectations in the first year, allowing Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy and Legal Aid of North Carolina-Charlotte to outsource work to law firms and in-house counsel in areas most in need of pro-bono help. He said the expansion to human-trafficking issues grew out of local interest in addressing the problem and statistics that indicate that North Carolina is something of a crossroads for such operations, with many victims flowing through the state.

He noted that he expects the program, which took some time to get off the ground in 2018, to grow in its second year.

"I would say we are gratified by the results of the first year, but not satisfied," he said.

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