

A CAPTAIN RESPONDS TO CRISIS

Steven Eppler-Epstein helped save legal aid in 2009

By **CHRISTIAN NOLAN**

Not many people running an organization could face a multi-million-dollar budget shortfall and somehow manage to avoid massive layoffs.

Nor could many people talk unionized employees into taking a 20-percent pay cut and still convince them to show up twice a month for unpaid work days.

And certainly not just anyone could convince lawmakers to help them out when the state is facing one of the largest financial disasters in its history.

In 2009, Steven Eppler-Epstein, executive director of Connecticut Legal Services, figured out a way to make all three happen.

The financial crisis affecting legal aid groups in the state remains a threat.

But at least for the time being, Eppler-Epstein has helped spare dozens of legal aid jobs from cuts this year.

"Steve really did more than anyone else to save legal aid in Connecticut this year when they were facing an unprecedented financial crisis," said Aaron Bayer, a former CLS board chairman who practices law at Wiggin and Dana.

"Steve emerged as the person to help coordinate everything," Bayer noted. "It's the kind of person he is. He plays well with others. He worked 'round the clock because he feels passionately about what he does, believes in the organization and the cause and was able to communicate that effectively to others."

The current major funding source for legal aid agencies – proceeds from Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) – has been anything but predictable in recent years. As the economy tanked, interest rates on the accounts have plummeted from 5 percent two years ago to 1 percent this year. As a result, funding from IOLTA dropped from \$20 million for 2007 to about \$4 million in 2009.

"We've never had a funding collapse as disastrous as the current meltdown of IOLTA funding," said Eppler-Epstein. "As soon as we knew the scope of the crisis, we knew we had to do everything possible to address the situation."

So Eppler-Epstein and his staff approached donors and the Connecticut Bar Foundation for additional support, and applied for a record number of grants.

They and other attorneys and staff at Greater Hartford Legal Aid and New Haven Legal Aid lobbied lawmakers for support, reminding them that during difficult economic times, low-income people need their legal help even more.

Personal Sacrifices

At legislative hearings, between 100 and 150 legal aid lawyers and staff would appear in support of their cause. Lawmakers sympathized but weren't initially sure how to help. Then they passed various court fee increases, which are expected to raise about \$7.7 million for legal aid.

"Just last week, I was talking to one of our lawyers about a victim of domestic violence who had been afraid to go to court because she was so afraid of being injured by the man who had been abusing her," Eppler-Epstein said. "Because we were there to help her, because we work so closely with domestic violence shelters, she feels she can go to court and get the court orders she needs to be safe."

Eppler-Epstein wonders if, without lawmakers' help, he would've had the staff necessary to assist more people like the one he recalled last week.

"There's the kind of worry that keeps you up at night wondering if you'll have the funding to keep your offices open, but this [economic crisis] has also been an opportunity to really have an impact," said Eppler-Epstein. "It highlighted for me how much of my job is to represent the work of legal aid to the legislature and the larger world. Not everybody knows the details of what we're doing and the difference we make in the lives of low-income families."

Nor do they know the sacrifices demanded of CLS staffers this year.

As Eppler-Epstein kept them apprised of the budget situation, he relayed the message that if CLS was to continue helping people in need, then everyone needed to take a pay cut to avoid layoffs.

In what Bayer described as a non-adversarial process, management and the union agreed to two unpaid work days per month,



Gary Lewis

Steven Eppler-Epstein, executive director of Connecticut Legal Services, personally took a pay cut of more than 30 percent to help keep his agency afloat financially.

though staff still wanted to come in those days. Eppler-Epstein himself took a pay cut in excess of 30 percent.

"He was able to earn the trust of staff people," said Bayer. "At the end of the day he didn't have to lay people off....but the battles not over."

Due to the state Judicial Branch's recent budget problems, \$1.5 million dollars that goes to legal aid groups through their "other expenses" line item will not be paid in 2010, Eppler-Epstein said.

There is also concern that Gov. M. Jodi Rell will put about \$2.5 million of their court filing fee funds to other use because of the state's overall budget deficit.

"Things could continue to get worse if we can't solve those problems," Eppler-Epstein said. "Our opportunity is to be able to hold on to what the legislature and governor intended to get us. If we can hold on to that much assistance, we can withstand the rest of the IOLTA decline. We expect to get through this crisis." ■

DOZEN WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

