

MBA President Sheff: Improving the public's perception

By Debbie Swanson

August 2014

Massachusetts Bar Association President Douglas K. Sheff's year has been marked by heightened engagement between lawyers and the public. Sheff took steps to improve the visibility of the legal profession's generous nature. He invited the public to be more than just clients, but partners working together in support of our system of justice. Sheff was also recognized for making landmark strides to improve the lives of workers, and sought to promote underrepresented segments of the population.

More than just accomplishments of a successful year, each of these efforts represent important victories on the road to improving the public image of lawyers - one of Sheff's goals from the outset of his presidency.

Sheff grew up viewing lawyers and judges as leaders and caretakers of their community, and continued to see this in action throughout his 30 years in practice. However, aware that negative stereotypes often cling to the legal profession, he resolved to shed light on the charitable nature of members.

"Lawyers and judges are good folks, givers of their time," Sheff says. "They give back an average of 56 hours a year in pro bono time (according to a 2013 report by the American Bar Association). That's not mandated; [it's] just part of our ethical code."

He encouraged MBA members to continue supporting established public outreach efforts, and to seek new opportunities. Members rose to the opportunity. The turkey drive helped feed nearly 2,000 people on Thanksgiving, more than 600 families in the Boston area. Members also contributed to a lawyer-backed project to fight homelessness at the Pine Street Inn. The Young Lawyers Division partnered with Cradles to Crayons to collect new and like-new children's items and warm winter gear as part of its Gear Up for Winter program.

When tragedy struck Boston with the Marathon bombings, nearly 90 MBA members immediately turned to the public's aid. Programs such as the Marathon Bombing Victims Legal Assistance Program and the MBA's special Dial-A-Lawyer programs ensured that victims knew their rights, had their medical records properly reviewed and received compensation due to them. Support continued as victims and families navigated the difficult year ahead, with pro bono efforts providing support to 25 individuals injured in the blasts.

"Lawyers often have dinners where we recognize a member and give out an award. These dinners aren't heard by the public," Sheff observed. "This year we had every major news outlet report something positive about our attorneys and judges."

Rights for all workers

Sheff himself was honored this year for his efforts on behalf of workers' rights. The Workers'

Injury Law and Advocacy Group (WILG) presented Sheff with the Special Recognition Award for Innovation and Community Service in recognition of his role in spearheading the MBA's Workplace Safety Task Force, which is part of his Working Families Initiative.

Composed of a diverse representation of industries, individuals on the task force studied statewide trends in workplace safety, with a focus on reducing injuries and deaths in the workplace. They also promoted education and awareness of workers' rights, and raised awareness in many communities throughout Massachusetts.

The task force played a major part in getting the Right to Know Bill passed in 2012, after the bill had failed nine times previously. The Right to Know Bill mandates that workers receive basic information about their employer and their legal rights, which is particularly important for temporary workers who often lack this knowledge.

The Workplace Safety Task Force was so successful, it was dubbed the "Sheff Model" and is being used as a prototype for other states pursuing similar initiatives, including California, Illinois, New York, Connecticut and Missouri.

"I was thrilled to be honored by this national organization. But what's twice as nice is having a role in inspiring other groups across the country, to see our work duplicated and grow over the years," says Sheff. "My vision is to one day see them all join together, sharing one project."

Sheff and the MBA's contributions to workers' rights are ongoing. Just recently, two other MBA-backed workers' bills were signed into law: the Burial Bill and the Domestic Workers Bill. The Burial Bill increases burial compensation from its previous amount of \$4,000 to eight times the average weekly wage in Massachusetts. The Domestic Workers Bill protects and establishes work standards for nannies, homecare workers and house cleaners who work in homes and are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Allies in funding: The 12 for 12 program

Viewing the public as more than just consumers to the legal profession, Sheff created the "12 for 12" program, which calls upon the public as partners in the goal of securing proper court funding. Through the program, he asked 12,000 lawyers to ask 12 of their clients to write to their legislators, advocating the need for adequate court funding. This push took place during the critical 12 week period open to budget deliberations after the governor announced his budget proposal.

"It's a new unique program, based on the idea that the message would be stronger if it came from more than just the lawyers and judges, but from the people," he explains. "With the unique geographical distribution of the MBA, we're in a good position to help."

While there's no metric with which to measure the success of the program, the feedback Sheff received was positive.

"Participating attorneys have told me their clients were grateful to be heard," he says. "The legislature hears plenty from lawyers and judges, but hearing from constituents shows that we all want the same thing."

Traumatic brain injury: an invisible epidemic

One of the causes Sheff is most passionate about is raising support and awareness for victims of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

"Each year, 2.4 million people suffer from a Traumatic Brain Injury and their case is often mishandled. In the military, there [is] an average of 22 suicides per day linked to head injury," Sheff says.

He is now creating a multi-profession task force, similar to the Worker's Rights Task Force, to address this problem. The group will study the current state of TBI victim's rights, advocate for solutions to any shortcomings discovered, and promote awareness.

"We want to provide help to the folks who need it, to educate the public, and to overcome bias which often accompanies an ailment that you can't easily see, that people aren't familiar with," he says.

Sheff says the marathon attacks strengthened his resolve to reach out to this population, as many victims of TBI are still seeking compensation.

"This population needs a voice. The TBI task force effort just shows the willingness of the bar to motivate another diverse group," says Sheff, who will remain committed to this effort beyond his presidency.

New opportunities will continue

During the past year, the MBA House of Delegates voted unanimously to create two new sections: the Complex Commercial Litigation Section, and the Workers' Compensation Section.

The Workers' Compensation Section is the first of its kind in Massachusetts and provides Workers' Compensation lawyers much deserved representation at the MBA. The Complex Commercial Litigation Section is intended to create a home for complex commercial litigators, many of whom practice before the Superior Court's Business Litigation Section or in the federal courts.

Sheff is pleased to add these new sections and to create new opportunities within the organization.

Sheff is proud of the accomplishments of the MBA over the past year and looks forward to seeing it continue to thrive under incoming president, Marsha V. Kazarosian.

"The MBA's goals will never stop; ideas are always picked up and continued by the next leader," he says. "We don't erase the board and start over."



MBA President Douglas K. Sheff and SJC Chief Justice Ralph D. Gants.



Sheff (second from left) and the MBA delegation met with Senator Elizabeth Warren.



MBA President Douglas K. Sheff met with U.S. Representative Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) this past spring where they discussed traumatic brain injury.



Sheff raises a toast at the MBA holiday party.



Sheff at the Thanksgiving food drive.