

AN IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR
DEVELOPING A
LAWYERS FOR LITERACY COMMITTEE

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INTRODUCTION

The Legal Community is certainly a key area of public life which should be connected to literacy issues, programs and resources. Every day attorneys deal with clients who may have limited English and literacy skills. The ability of attorneys to serve these clients in a fair and equitable way is often related to their awareness and skill in perceiving a lack of literacy skills and then adjusting their communications with clients to address these literacy needs.

For a decade the Palm Beach County Literacy Coalition, which serves as the Region V Adult Literacy Center, has had attorneys on its governing board. These attorneys and other board members realized that it would be very helpful if a committee or task force could be formed to look at developing a structure to link literacy needs and local lawyers.

An exploratory meeting was held with attorneys from the Coalition Board and staff from the Palm Beach County Bar Association. In preparation for this meeting, several people reviewed a publication of the American Bar Association, "Lawyers for Literacy." This booklet gave some guidance as to what state and local bar associations have done to promote literacy. This group agreed that there was interest in forming a committee to explore the Lawyers for Literacy concept.

THE FIRST YEAR

The Bar Association added a Lawyers for Literacy Committee as one of several other committees when it sent out a survey to member attorneys at the beginning of the year to assess interest in committee membership. Enough attorneys responded positively to serving on a Lawyers for Literacy Committee to set a first meeting.

A chairperson was selected to guide the committee during its first year. The director of the Palm Beach County Literacy Coalition attended all meetings to serve as a resource for community literacy programs. Several committee activities were identified and implemented during the year and the committee received considerable publicity for its work. The committee has continued to be a strong force in the life of the Bar Association as it has developed several significant projects which it has successfully executed.

The Literacy Coalition gave a presentation at the National Alliance of Urban Literacy Coalitions regarding the development of the Lawyers for Literacy Committee. Calls and email requests began to come in from cities in Florida as well as across the country to know more about how to develop and maintain a Lawyers for Literacy Committee. It is in response to these inquiries that this guide has been developed.

THE GUIDE

The guide describes the activities which have been implemented by the local committee. In addition, the Appendix provides a sampling of activities that have been implemented in Canada and other cities throughout the United States. The Canadian Bar Association has produced several very significant and helpful guides in this area. One of which is "The Lawyers for Literacy Awareness Kit." Several components from this kit are included in the Appendix.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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THE GOAL OF THE LAWYERS FOR LITERACY COMMITTEE

"To provide awareness of literacy needs in the community and to provide avenues of service for local attorneys to address these needs."

STEPS TO FORMING A LAWYERS FOR LITERACY COMMITTEE

- Identify key literacy partners in the community such as a literacy coalition, a literacy council, a school district, community colleges, faith-based organizations.
- Select a leader from this group to serve as the key contact for a potential Lawyers for Literacy Committee.
- Identify several attorneys who may have expressed interest in local literacy and education issues.
- Meet with the local bar association to assess their interest in forming a Lawyers for Literacy Committee.
- Do research to become aware of literacy-related projects and goals of legal associations in other cities and countries.
- Schedule an exploratory meeting with literacy representatives, several key attorneys and the bar association.
- Do a survey through the bar association to assess local interest in forming a Lawyers for Literacy Committee.
- Once a core group of attorneys has expressed interest in meeting, schedule the first meeting and publicize it widely throughout the legal community.
- At the first meeting, select a chairperson to guide the committee's work. This chairperson should be a prominent local attorney.
- If possible, host the meetings at the bar association to ensure its active participation.
- Utilize the literacy representative to attend the meetings on a regular basis to serve as a resource for community literacy knowledge. Ideally this person should represent a literacy coalition which represents many other literacy organizations.
- Brainstorm a variety of literacy activities which might be of interest to attorneys.
- Present the list of activities to the committee for their review.
- Select two or three activities or projects for the first year of the committee's life.
- Garner a broad base of support and participation for these projects.
- Appoint attorneys who will chair these individual projects and activities and ask them to invite other attorneys to work with them in implementing these projects and activities. This insures that the committee has full participation and each member feels needed and involved.
- At the end of the first year, review the year's work. Decide which projects should become annual ones and discuss possible activities to develop for the second and future years.

KEY PARTNERS FOR FORMING A LAWYERS FOR LITERACY COMMITTEE

- Literacy coalitions, educational and/or literacy organizations serving multiple populations including adults, children and families
- The local bar association
- The Public Defender's Office
- City Attorney's Office
- County Attorney's Office
- Legal Aid Society
- Office of the Attorney General

SAMPLE COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

- Have immigration lawyers speak to classes of adult learners about citizenship and related issues.

- Ask attorneys to speak to family literacy classes to inform adult learners of their legal rights and responsibilities.

- Involve lawyers as volunteer tutors in literacy programs in correctional institutions.

- List local literacy programs and resources in the bar association newsletter.

Utilize attorneys as tutors, mentors and

- learning partners for literacy programs serving adults and/or children.

Hold a fundraiser for a local literacy

- organization to provide money for books, tutoring materials, computer hardware and software or other essential needs.

Develop, print and distribute brochures

- for clients at a low literacy level addressing basic legal issues of interest to adult learners.

Disseminate literacy referral bookmarks

- and posters to local law firms.

Evaluate legal forms in current use for

- their readability level and propose simplified alternatives.

Explore recommending appropriate

- literacy training for appropriate adult and juvenile offenders.

Utilize attorneys who serve corporations

- to encourage the development of workplace literacy programs.

Encourage local law firms to conduct a

- "Literacy Audit" to assess how their firms are meeting the needs of clients with low literacy and English skills.

Conduct book drives to provide new,

- developmentally appropriate books for children's programs.

Raise funds to buy high interest adult

- books written on a low literacy level to donate to local adult literacy organizations. See that local jails, juvenile detention centers and other correctional institutions have books such as these readily available in adequate supply to inmates to encourage reading.

Have a "dress down" day in local law

- firms and ask attorneys to make a donation to local literacy efforts as part of their participation in the "dress down day."

SAMPLE ACTIVITY I

READ ACROSS AMERICA

PURPOSE:

To involve local attorneys in reading to elementary classes on Read Across America Day.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES:

Children become excited about reading as they see adult role models reading to them in an enthusiastic manner.

Attorneys become more aware of educational needs in their local community.

Children gain an elementary understanding of the legal profession as lawyers, who are reading to classes, explain their vocation to the children.

Attorneys may decide to become regular volunteers providing reading enrichment to one or more children for an hour or two a week.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

- Select an attorney who will chair this activity.
- Have the chair invite other attorneys to serve with the chair on this project.
- Assess how many attorneys have an interest in reading to elementary classrooms on Read Across America Day.
- Ask the attorneys to indicate the geographic area in which they would be willing to read.
- Designate a literacy representative who will work with the activity committee to select classrooms or programs in the geographic areas indicated by the interested attorneys.

- Ask the literacy representative to work with the schools or other programs to arrange appropriate classroom visits.

Match attorneys with classrooms.

- Have the literacy representative
- prepare a list of suggested books to read aloud to the various age levels.

- Ask the literacy representative to
- prepare a sheet of helpful hints on how to make stories come alive for children.

- Mail or fax a letter confirming the
- classroom assignment to the participating attorneys. Include the list of book suggestions and helpful hints on reading aloud.

- Ask the attorneys to confirm their
- participation.

- Remind the attorneys the day before
- the event through telephone or fax.

- Send an evaluation sheet to the
- schools to assess the event and to elicit suggestions for improvement for future years.

- Have the committee assess the
- success of the process.

- Invite the media to cover the Read
- Across America Event.

SAMPLE ACTIVITY II

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY

PURPOSE:

To involve local attorneys in speaking to classes of adult learners in recognition of International Literacy Day.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES:

- Adult learners will develop higher goals for their education and lives as a result of hearing successful role models speak to their classes.
- Adult learners will gain a clearer understanding of the legal profession.
- Adult learners will understand more clearly the role that reading plays in career development.
- Attorneys will gain a deeper understanding of the life struggles and issues of adult learners.
- Attorneys will become advocates for adult education and literacy.
- Lawyers may volunteer to become adult literacy tutors.

PROCESS:

- Select an attorney to chair this activity and recruit other attorneys to work on the project.
- Ask a literacy representative to identify classrooms appropriate for the activity.
- Assess the time of days most available for wide participation among attorneys.
- Invite local attorneys to sign up to participate as speakers for the event.
- Confirm the participation of each attorney.
- Work with the adult education/literacy sites to insure that classroom teachers understand the purpose and details of the event.
- Prepare a sheet explaining the day with specific guidelines for what the attorneys will want to include in their presentations.
- Invite the media to cover the International Literacy Day Celebration.
- Assess the event at the Lawyers for Literacy Committee meeting immediately following International Literacy Day.

SAMPLE ACTIVITY III

FUNDRAISER TO BENEFIT LOCAL LITERACY EFFORTS

PURPOSE:

To involve local attorneys in raising funds to buy books for use and distribution in adult and children's literacy programs.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES:

- Local literacy organizations will receive books for use in adult and children's literacy programs.
- Attorneys will become more interested in the activities of the Lawyers for Literacy Committee through attendance at the fundraising event
- Attorneys and the public at large will become more aware of literacy issues as a result of publicity related to the event.
- Attorneys will develop an interest in volunteering with adult or children's literacy programs.

PROCESS:

- Invite attorneys to plan the event and select a chair.
- Identify a local business which will donate space for the event and provide refreshments for the evening.
- Invite other law firms to become sponsors/benefactors of the event to raise additional funds.
- Send out invitations for the event to local law firms and other local attorneys.
- Publicize the event in the bar association newsletter
- Ask a local literacy representative to purchase books and materials with funds raised
- Distribute these books and materials to local literacy programs
- Assess the success of the event and suggest revisions for future years

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES OF LAWYERS FOR LITERACY INVOLVEMENT

- Attorneys will become more acquainted with local literacy needs and issues.
- Attorneys will become advocates for literacy programs and reform.
- Law firms will conduct literacy audits and address ways their firms can more adequately serve the needs of adult clients with low literacy and English skills.
- Literacy and adult education will be recommended as an appropriate activity for community service .
- Library collections in adult and juvenile correctional facilities will be enhanced.
- Attorneys will volunteer to become tutors for adults and children.
- Law firms will distribute literacy referral materials.
- Books and other literacy materials will be donated to local literacy programs.