



Colorado Lawyers Committee

Lawyers Working Together to Improve Conditions
for Children and the Underprivileged

BY LOREN FAYE

The Colorado Lawyers Committee (CLC), a nonpartisan consortium of 80 Colorado law firms, recently celebrated 40 years of pro bono legal advocacy for children and the underserved. Formed in 1978, the CLC unites lawyers from all-sized firms to collaborate on major public policies and systemic issues. At any given time, the nonprofit has about 25 active projects in the areas of poverty and public benefits, civil rights and criminal law, children's rights and education, community development, and immigration. Over the past four decades, the CLC and more than 10,000 volunteers have served more than 44,000 community members, and have been at the core of some of the state's most significant cases.

One of only seven other similar organizations in the country, the CLC does its work

through task forces, where attorneys from different firms, with different levels of experience and expertise, work together. If the project is politically sensitive, every effort is made to ensure a bipartisan approach. This model of collaboration allows lawyers to be active on cases when they are available, and less active when they can't be. Additionally, newer lawyers gain hands-on experience working side-by-side with more experienced attorneys.

"Oftentimes, it can be challenging to be able to dedicate the time and resources to large pro bono cases," says CLC Board Chair Peter Schwartz (Davis Graham & Stubbs LLP). "When the CLC takes on an issue, attorneys from several firms, and various practices and industries, come together to problem solve, which gives a broader range of opportunities

for lawyers to donate their time and expertise in a significant way."

Some of the CLC's significant recent accomplishments are highlighted below.

Protecting the Rights of Individuals with Mental Illness (Jail Wait Litigation)

For more than 10 years, volunteers have worked to ensure that mentally ill individuals in jails receive competency evaluations and treatment within a reasonable amount of time. The current litigation (*Center for Legal Advocacy v. Bicha*) resulted in a 2016 settlement that requires the State to evaluate individuals held in the county jail for competency within 24 or 28 days and, if they are found incompetent, to admit them to the state hospital within 28 days. The plaintiffs recently moved to reopen the settlement agreement and asked the court to declare the State to be in breach of the agreement.¹

Defending Landowners' Rights (Taylor Ranch Litigation)

For more than 20 years, volunteer lawyers have defended the rights of property owners in the San Luis Valley, one of the poorest regions of Colorado, to exercise their traditional use rights to graze livestock and collect wood and timber on the property known as the "Taylor Ranch" (*Lobato v. Taylor*). Since 2003, when the Colorado Supreme Court upheld these historic rights,² the team has focused on identifying the thousands of landowners entitled to access and successfully quashed efforts to prevent physical access to the property. The case was recently argued at the Colorado Court of Appeals—for the third time—and the Court upheld the landowners' rights.³

Hate Crimes Education


Since 1993, CLC volunteers have presented an educational program in schools throughout Colorado based on a fictional case arising from a violation of Colorado's Hate/Bias-Motivated Crimes Statute. The program sparks discussion among the students who act as jurors about diversity and the value of preventing the spread of racial slurs and hateful actions. In 2018, volunteers made presentations to more than



San Luis Valley residents gather outside the courtroom after oral arguments at the Colorado Court of Appeals on September 5, 2018.

in pro bono work. These young lawyers run the Denver Legal Night Clinics, serve on the steering committee for the Nonprofit Legal Audit Clinic, and work alongside other attorneys in a number of CLC projects. Membership in the CLC YLD is open without charge to law students, attorneys under age 40, and/or those who have been in practice less than eight years.

More about CLC

For more information about the CLC and its many task forces and volunteer projects, visit ColoradoLawyersCommittee.org. 

900 students. CLC recently received a grant to adapt the program so it can be offered in every school in the country.

Legal Clinics

CLC offers three legal clinics. In conjunction with the Denver Bar Association Young Lawyers Division and the Denver Access to Justice Committee, hundreds of volunteers provide legal information and referrals at two-hour legal clinics twice a month in Denver at Centro San Juan Diego. A similar clinic is held quarterly in Greeley, and Project Homeless Connect is offered annually, with the Colorado Chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsel. Lawyers and Spanish-speaking interpreter volunteers are needed, and no substantive expertise is required. Since the clinics began more than 10 years ago, more than 33,000 individuals and families who can't afford legal assistance have been served.

Support for Nonprofits

Transactional attorneys are actively involved in two CLC programs that assist small nonprofits: the Nonprofit Working Group, which matches nonprofits with pro bono lawyers who provide transactional-type assistance on isolated issues, and the Nonprofit Legal Audit Clinic, co-sponsored with the Colorado Chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsel, which pairs teams of attorneys with representatives from small nonprofits to assess the nonprofits' legal health. Since the programs began, more than 650 nonprofits have been served by CLC volunteers.

Young Lawyers Division

The CLC Young Lawyers Division provides an opportunity for young attorneys to serve in a leadership role in a public interest organization and to network with others who are interested

NOTES

1. *Center for Legal Advocacy v. Bicha*, Case No. 1:11-cv-02285-NYW (D.Colo. 2018).
2. *Lobato v. Taylor*, 70 P.3d 1152 (Colo. 2003).
3. *Alire v. Cielo Vista Ranch*, 2018 COA 160.

Trial Coming Up? I can help



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