

Challenges, Expected and Otherwise

Reflections on My Year as Chair of the MVL Advisory Board

Think back, if you can, to July 1, 2019. What were your expectations for the next year of your life and career? Your plans? What were you excited about? Nervous about? Worried about? Think about how you imagined the next twelve months unfolding.

So, how did all that work out?

On July 1, 2019, I began my one-year term as Chair of the Advisory Board of Metro Volunteer Lawyers. To say that the past year did not unfold as I had expected would be an understatement. But thanks to the dedication and leadership of the MVL Board, the DBA, the Denver legal community, and above all the heroic MVL staff, MVL is weathering the storm that 2020 has brought, and expanding its offerings in a time of unexpected need.

I want to take this opportunity to reflect on some of the changes and challenges that MVL has navigated during my year at the helm and share some thoughts regarding the year ahead.

Launching a New Program

MVL's most exciting development of 2019-2020 has nothing to do with viruses or lockdowns — instead it's a brand-new program designed to fill a longstanding gap in MVL's provision of services in family law.

The Family Law Court Program (FLCP) has long been one of the central pillars of MVL's services. Through this program, clients who need a divorce or an allocation of parental responsibilities attend two in-person clinics. In the first meeting, they are paired with a volunteer attorney or other professional to assist them with filling out the court forms and other paperwork necessary to initiate their case. Then MVL staff handle the filing of the case and service on the opposing party. Finally, the clients join another MVL volunteer attorney for

their Permanent Orders Hearing before a judge or magistrate, and the volunteer represents the client for that proceeding.

Through the FLCP, MVL provides high-quality pro bono representation to hundreds of low-income Coloradans every year. However, there have always been inherent limitations on the scope of the program. Eligibility is limited to those cases in which both sides are unrepresented, and in which there are no significant contested issues. And MVL has only been able to accept cases that have not yet been filed, so if a client has already filed their petition, they are not eligible for the program. These clients are not without recourse, but in cases with contested issues or counsel on the other side, clients have typically been placed in MVL's full representation referral program, which can result in a long wait by the client for a volunteer attorney willing to represent them in full.

Family Law Unbundled — MVL's newest program, supported by a generous grant from the Conover Foundation — is designed to fill that gap and serve clients with a broader range of issues. Clients in this new program are still provided services in a clinic setting, but the volunteer attorneys in the Unbundled program provide limited-scope representation under Colorado Rule of Professional Conduct 1.2(c). This allows them to assist clients in already-filed matters, in matters involving contested issues, and in matters in which the other side is represented.

Unbundled volunteers are given their clients' files beforehand, and prepare in advance for hour-long, one-on-one meetings with their attorneys. The attorneys provide legal advice and guidance and, under C.R.C.P. 11(b), can even draft pleadings for the clients. This provides a

fuller-service model for those clients with more complex issues, while still limiting the amount of in-person time required of the volunteers to less than that required for a full representation case.

Since the Unbundled program launched in the November 2019, more than 50 clients have already taken advantage of the program to obtain high-quality, essential legal services through MVL. This has also reduced the burden on MVL's full representation referral program, allowing the volunteers in that program to focus on the most complex cases.

We are truly excited to watch the Family Law Unbundled program continue to grow in the coming years.

Learning to Serve Clients Remotely in the Age of COVID

Along with the rest of the world, MVL went remote in mid-March 2020, due to the stay-at-home orders imposed to stem the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The remote model has changed the way MVL provides services in many ways, but it has not changed MVL's commitment to serving its client population.

Once the stay-at-home orders were issued, MVL moved all activities for the FLCP, the Unbundled program, the Post-Decree Clinic, and the Denver Indian Center clinic to a virtual model. This includes providing representation in telephonic court hearings and in client meetings via videoconference platforms. For these programs, the move to a remote model has proven successful and clients in these programs are still able to access the same level of services as in the pre-COVID world.

Moving to a virtual model has proven to be a greater challenge for the Power of Attorney Clinic. In this program, MVL volunteers provide clinical consultations with seniors to prepare power of attorney and other advance-planning documents. For these clinics, MVL volunteers go into senior centers for in-person sessions. Given the disproportionately high COVID risk faced by seniors, these centers have by necessity closed their doors to outside visitors, including MVL volunteers.

Few senior centers have the necessary technological infrastructure (computers, webcams, scanners, fast internet) in place to enable virtual consultations. MVL is working to try to bridge this gap, including purchasing several laptops that can travel to senior centers in the hopes that consultations will be able to resume via a remote platform.

Overall, even amid the chaos of COVID, the dedicated and intrepid MVL staff has kept its programs going strong, even innovating to find new ways to serve our community.

Virtual BBB

Even as MVL worked to transform its procedures to continue serving its client population, COVID-19 had one more curveball to throw, as it required can-

celing the in-person Barrister's Benefit Ball. This annual event is MVL's largest fundraiser and was originally scheduled for the beginning of May, but the event has, like MVL itself, gone entirely virtual!

While we will miss seeing everyone dressed up and face-to-face this year, the DBA is working to put together a series of online events, culminating in a live video-conference party and fundraiser. Watch this space for more details and dates, and please contribute when you can!

New At-Large MVL Board Member Positions

Finally, the first half of 2020 brought one more structural change to the MVL Board. The board has historically consisted exclusively of members chosen by each of MVL's constituent bar associations around the

metro area. This year, the board decided to tweak that structure by adding three at-large positions, with staggered three-year terms, that are not tied to any particular geographical region or bar association.

These positions offer MVL the opportunity to recruit to the board a more diverse set of viewpoints and voices that might not otherwise be heard. One of these positions is still unfilled, so if you or someone you know may be interested in serving on the MVL Board as an at-large member, please reach out!

On the whole, 2019-2020 was not the year I was expecting when I took on the chair position of the MVL Board. But it did bring opportunities for growth and change (whether sought out or forced upon us), and I hope I am leaving MVL at least as strong (if not stronger!) than I found it. 🍷

METRO VOLUNTEER LAWYERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Help low-income elderly clients throughout the Denver-Metro area complete advance planning documents like a living will or powers of attorney. No elder law/probate experience necessary, and no additional time commitment beyond the 2-3 hour clinic.

Pro bono attorneys can make a difference.

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