



COZEN O'CONNOR JOINS PLSE PRO BONO PARALEGAL PROGRAM, ADDS KEY NEW DIMENSION: VOLUNTEER ATTORNEYS

May 30, 2018. Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) announced today that Cozen O'Connor had become the third law firm sponsor of PLSE's new Pro Bono Paralegal Program, and has added a key new dimension: attorneys in the sponsoring law firm supervising the paralegals.

Developed in partnership with the Philadelphia Association of Paralegals, the PLSE Paralegal Program uses professional paralegals to help expunge criminal history records of hundreds of low-income Philadelphians each year. The idea was launched late last year with Ballard Spahr as the first location. Pepper Hamilton took the program to a new level when it organized its paralegals in a service team under a Pro Bono Paralegal. Now, Cozen O'Connor has added a new dimension to the program, by having some of its attorneys review the work of their paralegals.

Chanel Lattimer, as associate attorney in the firm's Intellectual Property Department, had experience with expungement petitions as a result of earlier volunteer service with the Young Lawyers Division of the Philadelphia Bar Association and Community Legal Services. "We are making sure that the petitions filed in court by PLSE accurately include all the necessary information taken from the underlying dockets in the cases where the criminal charges were dismissed," she explains. "We want to ensure that when the petitions get to the Judge for a hearing, there's really almost nothing to argue about." Chanel encourages others to get involved as it is "very straightforward work that any paralegal or lawyer can do, and it can have a major impact on the lives of the clients."

Few people understand that if you ever got arrested, even if all charges were dropped or the judge found you innocent, your arrest record is permanent. Worse, it's all there online for anyone to see just by typing in your name. It is estimated that over 80% of landlords and employers check criminal record histories routinely as part of doing background checks. Just being arrested and charged with a crime stops people even from becoming a hairdresser, hair-braider, maintenance or food-service worker in a public school, or health care aide, because there is a "good moral character" requirement for admission to state-licensed trades.

PLSE paralegals check the accuracy of work done by law students at Penn and Drexel Universities who obtain information from the clients at intakes around the city and then generate draft court petitions. The paralegals compare the petitions against the official data sources (criminal dockets) and correct approximately 1 in 5 of the drafts. A lawyer's review is necessary before the petition can get filed in court, and PLSE's attorneys do that for more than 2000 petitions each year. Now, attorneys in law firms like Cozen O'Connor will start helping, allowing even more to be filed.

"This is a major development for us," said PLSE's interim executive director Tobey Oxholm. "No matter what subject area a paralegal works in, they have been trained to have sharp eyes. Since everything is on-line and a petition takes only a few minutes to review for accuracy, they can do it at almost any time, wherever they might be, home or office, evening or weekend or during the day."

The next paralegal training program will be on June 13 at Blank Rome, from 12:00 -1:30 pm with lunch included. For more information about PLSE and its Paralegal Program, contact info@plsephilly.org.

Recipient of the 2018-2019 Barra Award as an Exemplary Non-Profit
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