In early May, MIE sponsored a webinar about private fundraising during the pandemic. That now seems a million years ago — our world has already changed considerably since then, as we confront the challenges of racial justice reform in addition to those of COVID-19. However, the guidance provided in the webinar remains on point and relevant.

For me, as the moderator and organizer of the webinar, what came through most loud and clear was this: **There Is Money Out there to be Raised.**

As sub-messages to that, I share the following take-homes:

- **Change, modify and reinvent, but do NOT stop fundraising** — How and what you do may differ from program to program, but assume that you will be continuing to fundraise because legal aid is more critical now than ever. The question is not “Do we fundraise now?” but “How do we modify our fundraising strategies to be most effective in this time of crisis?”

- **Be in touch with your strongest supporters** — Make personal “contact,” by phone when possible and appropriate, with all board members, major donors, key volunteers. Start with those you know best. Not necessarily to ask for money. Check in. Seek advice. How you will make each of these contacts will depend on the supporter and your current relationship with that person. Take some time to develop the best strategy for each.

- **Effectively utilize your board members, other key volunteers, and the executive director** — You are having conversations with those closest to you — enlist their help in contacting others. As we all know, peer to peer is almost always the most effective way to communicate with donors, and a call from the executive director has more impact than one from a member of the development staff. The crisis doesn’t change this; but it may make it more important.

- **Show your relevance, effectiveness** — For example, you can show your relevance by having useful and easy to find information on your website for clients facing problems caused by the crisis. Every story you tell about someone your program helped during this crisis shows your relevance. Let the potential donor say to herself, “I want to support this program to help them do more of that.”

- **Don’t panic, be strategic, adjust to uncertainty** — Easy to say, hard to do, as things are changing every day. And that’s why I’ve included this final take-home:

- **This is not legal aid’s first crisis** — In an article from 2009, Gerry Singsen, a long-time legal aid trainer and consultant, detailed the history of crises that have hit legal aid financially over the years. The crisis that remains the most vivid in my mind...
was in 1982. Reagan came into office committed to eliminating the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), which at that time provided about 80% of the total funding in the U.S. for civil legal aid. Funding almost immediately was cut by one-third. It was devastating and there was real fear that civil legal aid would not survive. The point Gerry makes, and that I want to emphasize, is that through these crises, legal aid has survived and ultimately thrived. And I think this is because of three things — we knew we had a cause worth saving, that people depended on legal aid to survive; we worked our butts off; and we listened and networked and learned and took the steps that we could, however imperfectly, to solve the problem.

Here are the key messages that our panelists shared in this webinar. We hope their experience is helpful to you, and we look forward to networking and learning from you readers as we move forward through this crisis.

**Fundraising from the Legal Community — Bob Glaves, Executive Director, Chicago Bar Foundation**

The CBF works closely with law firms, individual attorneys and corporate legal departments to build active financial and pro bono support for access to justice. The CBF raises over $2 million annually from the legal community to provide funding to the 30 plus legal aid programs in the Chicago area, and also raises funds, primarily from the legal community, for its own projects. Here are the key points that Bob shared on the webinar:

**Messaging to the Legal Community:**

Early on, as the crisis was developing, we had conversations with some of our strongest supporters and learned that our messaging need to change. We needed to:

- Acknowledge that this is a tough time for everyone, as everyone is facing challenges on some level in their own lives. Lawyers and law firms have been directly affected by the crisis.
- Relate the ask and the timing of it directly to the crisis — explain why funding is particularly important now, but also allow firms the flexibility to make the decision about giving when it is right, or at least better, for them.

**Running a Legal Community Campaign During the Crisis:**

We had kicked off our annual legal community campaign in early March with our regular in-person event. The crisis hit a week later, and required us to almost completely change our strategy. The core of our revised strategy was providing ideas for virtual events and other virtual activities, and trying to sync it with what firms already were trying to do more generally with their teams (staying connected, new kinds of community building).

We found that the campaign leadership in some firms were reluctant to move ahead, but those that did have found that people responded positively.

**Deciding What to Cancel, What to Postpone, What to Move to Virtual for the Balance of the Year:**

Many of our law firm partners make their annual gifts by sponsoring one of our events. Conversations with them indicated that while in many cases their budgets face many challenges in this environment, their support would not be conditional on us actually holding the events to which the funds — the sponsorship — would normally be tied. In fact, this year it might even be a positive given the extra expense involved and uncertainty of when mass gatherings again will be permitted. Virtual events can be a good alternative when the event is suited to it, but in some cases funding for a “non-event” might be possible.

**Going Virtual — Shea Conlan, Development and Communications Coordinator, Atlanta Legal Aid Society**

Atlanta Legal Aid, an a Legal Services Corporation (LSC) funded program, has been a pioneer in private fundraising since the 1980s, and continues that tradition today. Shea manages social media, crafts fundraising appeals, works on events, and practices creative storytelling. She shared the following ideas about virtual events and online opportunities during the pandemic:

**Taking an Event Virtual:**

One of our annual events is the Great Whiskey Debate, usually held at a local historic courthouse. Several local bars and restaurants are invited to craft whiskey cocktails for the approximately 250 attendees...
to taste. Attendees network and eat local BBQ before voting for their favorite drink at the end of the night.

When we decided to pivot to virtual, we decided we could keep many of the same elements. We invited three local bartenders to craft cocktails with simple ingredients. We then packed those ingredients into kits, which a local fulfilment house put together and delivered. The bartenders created short videos, which we hosted on a webpage with a hidden URL which we only provided to event attendees. On the night of the event, attendees visited the webpage and watched the videos one-by-one, crafting the cocktails as they went. We had wide engagement on a Facebook event page, where attendees shared photos and talked about which cocktails they liked best before voting via a poll on the web page.

What We Learned:

■ **Sponsorships were different** — Sponsorships at the higher levels, from corporations and law firms, were down, but there was wide sponsorship participation at lower levels, especially from individuals.

■ **Messaging is important** — Your virtual event needs to be FUN, but when marketing the event note that all funds raised are going to provide critical legal services to people who cannot afford them. By attending the event, ticket-holders are having fun while ALSO keeping people housed and protected against violence. Communicate this message when speaking to potential sponsors — their sponsorships are key to helping the people most impacted by the pandemic’s economic fallout.

■ **The virtual event needs to be interactive** — Think of what you can provide as a physical takeaway (e.g., the whiskey kits). Give attendees something they can do as opposed to just watching a zoom. If your existing in-person event doesn’t transition easily to virtual, don’t be afraid to switch it up for this year.

■ **Include a way for folks to interact with each other** — It can be as simple as encouraging ticket-holders to post photos on a designated Facebook event page.

Social Media:

**Storytelling** — Typically, I focus on client stories by scheduling interviews directly with clients, where I can photograph them and get their story first-hand. Since this isn’t possible in the COVID-19 era, I pivoted to telling the stories of our lawyers helping clients. We use Instagram as our main storytelling platform, and we always try to post a picture of the client or the lawyer, not stock photos. Here are some pointers for storytelling now:

■ Reach out (again and again) to your lawyers and paralegals to get them to share how they have been helping folks during the crisis.

■ Emphasize that the stories do not have to be huge victories — it is the “small” everyday actions of legal aid staff that make a difference in the lives of our clients.

■ In every story post, include some standard language about why legal aid is especially essential right now.

■ Make it very clear to your readers why these stories matter.

**Education** — Atlanta Legal Aid has created short (~one minute) explainer videos on topics relevant to our clients during COVID-19 — unemployment, stimulus checks, domestic violence help, food stamps, etc. They very simply explain the issues and how to seek help. We use the platform Lumen; we have the paid subscription but they have a free version available. We push these out on social media and on our self-help website. We primarily use Facebook for our educational content. Although these are created to help clients, they can also demonstrate to donors how we are helping people get the information they need to solve serious, current problems.

**Stewardship** — To thank law firm donors who have pledged their support for 2020, we made unique graphics and posted them on Facebook and LinkedIn, thanking them for their loyalty and support in these difficult times. LinkedIn is our primary platform for law firm stewardship.

**Individual Giving** — Jim Barrett, Executive Director, Pisgah Legal Services, Asheville, North Carolina

Pisgah Legal Services (PLS), a program serving 11 counties in Western North Carolina, has more than quadrupled in size since giving up its LSC funding in 1998 by diversifying its funding. Over $1 million of its $6 million budget comes from its annual campaign, and 80% of the annual campaign comes from individual donors giving $1000 or more. Jim, the program’s long-time executive director, talks about their strategies for not just maintaining but growing this critical portion of their budget during the pandemic:

**Our Approach to Asking for Money Now:**

We have received advice that says wait and advice
that says you cannot afford to wait. We have chosen to thread the needle — communicating with donors often with our e-newsletter, a quarterly update to major donors from the executive director, thank you calls, and Zoom major donor appreciation events. We are using these devices to talk about what we are doing, show our appreciation, and include an ask for contributions from those who feel able to give now.

We are also making personal contact by phone or e-mail with select major donors to find out how they are doing, ask for their advice, and share the preparations we are making for the expected onslaught of cases, what we are seeing already, and how we are providing education now to try to prevent hardships from becoming disasters down the road. When the conversation lends itself, we are asking for a donation.

Messaging, Shared Consistently, to Cut through the Competition and the Bad News About COVID-19:

- Our mission is to help people through crises, so who else are you going to call to help unemployed people in a pandemic? Ghost busters? No, legal aid!
- Demonstrate how we are relevant. Highlight poverty law expertise.
- Do Facebook live presentations, include FAQs on website, participate in media interviews.
- Advocacy is fundraising — use press releases, op-ed pieces, public radio sponsorships, etc., to reinforce the message.

Effective Utilization of Board Members, Other Volunteers and Our Strongest Donors:

Even with powerful messaging and consistent communications, we are worried about the campaign when some past donors cannot afford to give and the volatile stock market is making people feel insecure. So we are doing more:

- We called each of our board members to interview them about how they might help us meet our fundraising goals, and
- We called past board members and volunteers for help in thanking donors for sticking with us.

Plans for Events:

- Events are a big part of our prospecting and stewardship. We rely on two large events and one smaller friend-raising activity to cultivate current donors and bring in new supporters.
- We turned our annual Justice League Reception into a virtual event. We provided a short video and PowerPoint, had a variety of speakers and a client story. We held smaller group break-outs using Zoom with an ice breaker question about why they support PLS.
- Small group Zoom meetings are planned for donors who want more. These are expected to be especially popular among our senior donors.
- Virtual Justice Matters tours are being held monthly for those who want to know more.
- We will have Zoom meetings with major donor prospects.

And, in Conclusion…

- Set an ambitious goal that fits the challenge ahead of us. (Don't aim low; people want to strive for a goal; give them a way to defeat the virus.)
- Get some challenge gifts that others can match.
- Don't waste a crisis; this is our time to get maximum exposure and funding.
- Fundraise with strong messaging on need and our impact; soft on the ask until you know where the donor stands.
- Be very visible with solutions that demonstrate that we've been doing this and we are good at it. We just need more help to do more of it now.

1 Meredith McBurney, a consultant since 1997, specializes in resource development for legal aid and other advocacy organizations. She is the resource development consultant to MIE, and provides in-depth consulting for individual programs. She began her legal aid career as the administrator for Colorado Rural Legal Services. From 1981 to 1997, she served as the executive director for COLTAF, Colorado’s IOLTA program, and the Legal Aid Foundation of Colorado, Colorado’s statewide fundraising organization. From 1997 to 2018, she was the resource development consultant to the ABA’s Resource Center for Access to Justice Initiatives. She holds a B.S. in Business Administration from the University of California, Berkeley, and a B.S. in Zoology from Colorado State University, Fort Collins. When she isn’t working on access to justice issues, she works as a field ornithologist for the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies. Meredith may be reached at meredithmcburney@msn.com.

Bob Glaves has been Executive Director of The Chicago Bar Foundation since October, 1999, prior to which he had a successful nine-year career as a civil litigator in a Chicago law firm. As Executive Director of
the CBF, Bob brings Chicago’s legal community together to improve access to justice for people in need and to make the legal system more fair and efficient for everyone. Since Bob became Executive Director, the CBF has increased the amount of its annual grants and fundraising more than tenfold and has played a lead role in launching a number of groundbreaking access to justice initiatives. Bob is a 1991 magna cum laude graduate of The John Marshall Law School, received a B.A. degree in Political Science and Journalism from the University of Wisconsin in 1987. Bob may be reached at bglaves@chicagobar.org.

Shea Conlan is the Development & Communications Coordinator at Atlanta Legal Aid Society, where she manages social media, crafts fundraising appeals, and practices creative storytelling. Prior to this role, she worked on creating educational materials and connecting communities around seed saving at the national nonprofit Seed Savers Exchange. Shea is passionate about connecting people to important causes and empowering others to make positive change in the world. Shea may be reached at sconlan@atlantalegalaid.org.

Jim Barrett has been the executive director of Pisgah Legal Services since 1993 and has served on the staff for more than 30 years. Under his leadership PLS has grown to become a leader in the nonprofit field, not only providing legal services to clients but improving public policies across North Carolina and leveraging millions of dollars to improve life in western North Carolina. Jim may be reached at jim@pisgahlegal.org.


3 See Gerry Singsen’s 2009 article reprinted in the Spring 2020 MIE Journal.