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The Trial Lawyer

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BY STEVE MURPHY





SFTLA Co-Sponsors Walk-In Legal Clinic

“Can you help a client with a debt collection agency breathing down her throat?” This question was put to SFTLA member Andy Locke on a crisp summer morning in July at the Main San Francisco Public Library. Andy had volunteered to provide free legal advice along with twelve other lawyers, including six from SFTLA, which co-sponsored the event with the Bar Association of San Francisco’s Volunteer Legal Service Program. The event is called the Legal Advice and Referral Clinic (LARC). The purpose of the LARC is to help members of our community who cannot afford a lawyer to understand and exercise their legal rights.

Even though Andy is not a debt collection specialist, he found that this, like many other issues brought by clients, was very fact specific and could be easily resolved by looking at the paperwork the client had brought. Before the morning was over, he and the other SFTLA volunteers (Tom Paoli, Charlie McCarthy, Miles Cooper, Brittany Novotny, and myself) had tackled issues ranging from torts to landlord tenant to basic business disputes. Over one hundred clients were served.

Andy reports: “It’s a good experience. I’d recommend it to anyone. I felt like I got as much out of it as the persons who sought advice. There is an unvarnished quality to it. People come to you with a problem. You listen. You engage them. You give them some advice and some

options, and when they leave, you feel like maybe you’ve lightened their burden a little. Plus, the organizers and organization is top notch. They make it very easy for the lawyers.”

The LARC, which occurs every second Saturday at the library, is perfect “bite size” pro bono work for busy lawyers who do not have the time to get involved in long-running cases. The clinic runs from 10:15 a.m. to 1 or 2:00 p.m. The LARC staff makes sure there are lawyers present with a range of specialties, such as bankruptcy, landlord-tenant and family law. Many of the issues presented, though, are basic legal issues that turn on their facts. The purpose of the clinic is not necessarily to solve the client’s problem (though that happens often), but to determine in about ten minutes whether

the client would benefit from further legal consultation. Each volunteer lawyer sees about ten to fifteen clients over the course of the day. Referrals are made to BASF’s Lawyer Referral and Information Service. If the client will not benefit from further legal advice, that hard news must be delivered.

If you have always wanted to do pro bono work but can’t seem to find the time, the LARC is the perfect opportunity. SFTLA hopes to co-sponsor another LARC in 2007. If you would be interested in volunteering at a future LARC, please contact either Chuck Geerhart or BASF directly.

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