Executive Director’s Letter
Bonnie Sullivan

I attended a pro bono conference recently where one of the most popular sessions addressed what motivates lawyers to volunteer. Imagining I would learn the secret to engaging a new and undiscovered pool of eager volunteers, I signed up for the session. Apparently social scientists have studied not only the reasons people volunteer, but specifically why lawyers volunteer. Their learned findings are not surprising, however. Lawyers volunteer because they receive personal fulfillment from helping the less fortunate. Although some lawyers view pro bono work as an ethical obligation or duty, most simply want to give back to their communities or people in need. Rewards or public recognition do not figure into their motivation either.

MVLS volunteers have been telling us the same thing for over thirty years. They say their lives are enriched by pro bono work. Our newsletter profiles just such a volunteer, who found personal fulfillment and professional satisfaction from representing a low income tenant, instead of her typical client in such disputes—landlords. MVLS is grateful for volunteers like Karen Byers and hundreds of others who help thousands of Marylanders every year. We promise you will receive much more than you give when you volunteer for MVLS and we will work hard to make volunteering easy by providing malpractice insurance, mentors, document management and more. To join our panel, sign-up on our new website www.mvlslaw.org or email Deputy Director Richard Chambers at richard@mvlslaw.org.

SAVE THE DATE

MVLS RECEPTION TO CELEBRATE PRO BONO

Honoring our volunteer lawyers, law students, donors and friends

Thursday, October 18, 2012
at 6:00 pm
Westminster Hall, Baltimore

Hosted by:
Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service, Leadership in Public Service, University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, Maryland Public Interest Law Project
New Partnership to Help Homeless Women
MVLS is proud to announce a new partnership with the Homeless Persons Representation Project (HPRP). Bi-monthly, an MVLS paralegal and a HPRP attorney will spend a morning at My Sister’s Place, a day resource center for homeless women, to perform intake and offer brief advice for a wide variety of legal needs.

New Website
Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service launched our new website this winter to rave reviews. The new site makes it easier than ever for clients to find help, volunteers to take open cases, and for our friends to stay up to date on program news. Check it out at www.mvlslaw.org.

Awards
MVLS Deputy Director Richard R. Chambers has been chosen to participate in the Maryland State Bar Association’s 2012-2013 Leadership Academy, which is celebrating its 15th anniversary. The Leadership Academy is a year-long program that trains lawyers to develop their leadership skills and provides opportunities for them to assume leadership roles in the MSBA and local bar associations.

Caroline D. Ciraciolo, MVLS Board Member and Bonnie A. Sullivan, MVLS Executive Director are among The Daily Record’s 2012 “Top 100 Women.”

MVLS tax volunteer Gary Compton will be awarded the MSBA Tax Section’s J. Ronald Shiff Pro Bono Award at its annual Irving Shulbank Memorial Dinner and Program on May 17, 2012. Mr. Compton is a senior lawyer who began practicing tax law after retirement from the Social Security Administration. He is a dedicated volunteer who represents MVLS clients in tax controversies before the IRS.

The Baltimore County Bar Association presented long-standing MVLS volunteer Laurie Hansen of Gallagher & Hansen, LLP with their “Pro Bono Attorney of the Year Award.”

M. Natalie McSherry, MVLS Board Member, is a lifetime member of The Daily Record’s Circle of Excellence “Top 100 Women.” Ms. McSherry also received the Maryland Legal Services Corporation’s prestigious 2011 Arthur W. Machen, Jr. Award.

Michelle Swift, MVLS Director of Pro Bono Programs, received the Maryland Legal Services Corporation’s 2011 “William L. Marbury Outstanding Advocate Award.”

Hope Tipton, MVLS Director of Project HEAL at Hopkins Children’s received the Bar Association of Baltimore City’s “Presidents Award” (Young Lawyers Division) and the Women’s Bar Association’s “2012 Pro Bono Award for Baltimore City/Baltimore County/Carroll County.”

Maureen van Stone, MVLS Director of Project HEAL at Kennedy Krieger Institute was recognized as one of The Daily Record’s 2011 “Leading Women.” She also was selected for Leadership Maryland’s 20th Anniversary Class.

NEW FACES
AT MVLS

STEPHANIE J. AUSTIN joined MVLS as Director of Annual Fund and Events in October, 2012. Her work will be focused on sustaining and broadening the organization’s base of support. Prior to joining MVLS, Stephanie managed the annual giving program at St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore. She is a graduate of Goucher College in Baltimore, MD.

CHERI P. WENDT-TACZAK joined MVLS in April 2012 as the first program attorney for our Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC). She will be supporting our tax controversy volunteers and will provide brief advice to clients needing immediate assistance with a tax problem. Prior to joining MVLS, Ms. Wendt-Taczak was a solo practitioner in Annapolis where she practiced tax law as well as estate planning and administration. A 2008 graduate of the University of Baltimore School of Law, Ms. Wendt-Tacazk also attended the University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland, where she studied comparative law.
MVLS VOLUNTEER STANDS UP TO HARASSING LANDLORD

When MVLS recently received a “case closed” letter from one of our volunteer attorneys, one sentence stood out - “This was one of the most satisfying moments in my legal career,” wrote Karen Byers, a young lawyer at the Law Offices of Heidi S. Kenny in Cockeysville. The case she was referring to involved an MVLS client’s landlord-tenant dispute.

“Dorothy” called MVLS in late 2011. Her former landlord was suing her for thousands of dollars claiming unpaid rent and damage to her former apartment. Ms. Byers explained that “Dorothy had lost her Section 8 voucher when her son moved out of the apartment in early 2008. Soon after he left, the landlord raised the rent to over $1,100 a month. It’s understandable that Dorothy felt that she had to vacate.”

When Dorothy moved out, the landlord immediately filed a lawsuit claiming she owed unpaid rent. Dorothy was confused because “he said I was one of his best tenants [and] there was nothing to worry about if I moved out.” Although the initial suit was dismissed for lack of prosecution, the landlord continued to harass Dorothy.

In 2011, the landlord sued Dorothy a second time. In this suit, the issue was not just nonpayment of rent, but a claim that she owed thousands of dollars for property damage to her former apartment. Dorothy was shocked. She knew the claims were totally baseless. “It was really an attempt by the landlord to harass the client,” says Ms. Byers.

When an MVLS intake paralegal called Karen Byers, Dorothy’s trial in Baltimore County District Court was scheduled for the following week. Notwithstanding the imminent trial date, Ms. Byers took the case. She knew the area of law well because her firm represents a lot of landlords and property owners. This case was different, however, since she would be helping someone in need. As she said, “I believe in doing pro bono work. It’s important for me to give something back.” Although Ms. Byers had only a few days to prepare for trial, she got a great result for her client. “The claim was thrown out,” she says. “Dorothy didn’t have to pay the landlord a dime.”

Karen told us the case reinforced her commitment to pro bono work. “I usually find myself on the other side of this issue,” she says. “But this was a great case. I felt like I did something good for someone who truly deserved it.”

Starting a Tradition of Giving

Twenty-eight years ago, Jonathan Schochor, Philip Federico and Kerry Staton founded Schochor Federico & Staton, P.A. which quickly developed a reputation as the premier medical malpractice firm in the region.

Over the last few years, the firm has been quietly gaining a reputation for something else, extraordinary philanthropy. One example of the firm’s commitment to “giving back” is partner Kerry Staton’s service on our board of directors since 2009. Another is the firm’s generous sponsorship of MVLS’ annual benefit over the past four years. But in 2012, the firm took giving back to a whole new level.

Not only did the firm support us with its very generous ‘Final Four’ sponsorship of our recent ‘March Madness’ themed benefit, but also achieved 100% partner participation in our annual Partner’s Club Campaign. Senior Managing Partner Jonathan Schochor explains that the firm has deliberately created a culture of philanthropy. “After years of practicing law, we’re privileged, we’re fortunate. We’ve worked very hard but we’re thankful for what we have.” He continued, “We believe - all the partners - that we need to be mindful of the needs of others and give back.”

Mr. Schochor also understands the very important and specific needs of MVLS clients. He credits his business partner of nearly thirty years MVLS board member Kerry Staton for bringing the issue to light. “Kerry brought it to my attention that there was a significant need to help people who don’t qualify for Maryland Legal Aid but still can’t afford lawyers’ fees. I knew we needed to get involved to bridge that gap. We made it our business, through our contributions, to make MVLS a priority. We see MVLS as being crucial to the success of the community.”

Mr. Schochor issued a call to action to other firms, both large and small, to follow in their charitable footsteps. “The practice of law is about more than handling a group of cases.” He explained that the essence of the practice of law is to “help the public. We ask other law firms to join us in the extraordinary endeavor –let’s all partner up to help.”
On the evening of March 15th, Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS) hosted a “March Madness” themed benefit at the Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards. Over 250 MVLS ‘fans’ watched the NCAA tournament basketball games on three big screens, enjoyed a sports fan menu of stadium fare, played arcade basketball games, met the Towson University and Johns Hopkins mascots, bid on exciting silent auction items and toured the museum.

Former Baltimore Colts defensive tackle Art Donovan attended as the Honorary Sports Legend of the evening. Mr. Donovan generously signed autographs, posed for pictures, and entertained guests.

A special thank you to our 53 sponsors, 3 media sponsors, and many silent auction donors who supported our annual benefit and helped make it a great success.
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A special thank you to our "sports legend" Art Donovan!

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Join our Sustainer Circle – a key group of supporters who give monthly to help sustain our critically important work.  A manageable monthly gift of $15, $25, $50, $100 or more creates a steady and predictable stream of revenue that MVLS can count on month after month.  Visit www.mvlslaw.org/sustainers to learn more.