



## **Mentoring: Strengthening a Professional Community**

**By: Jayne Reardon, Executive Director, Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism**

*“I got as much if not more than I gave!”*

--A mentor reacting at a celebration marking the end of the year long term

To the Commissioners’ delight, feedback from the mentors who participated in a Lawyer-to-Lawyer Mentoring Program approved by the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism has been as enthusiastic as the feedback received from the new lawyers. Not only is the program helping new lawyers transition to practice professionally, it also is reinforcing professionalism concepts among the mentors and strengthening our professional community.

Now in its fourth year, the Commission’s statewide mentoring program has over 75 organizations sponsoring the program, and more than 3,500 attorneys are currently involved or have participated in the yearlong program. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Other states interested in adopting a mentoring program have looked to Illinois for guidance, and we happily share our experiences. Here, we briefly describe the program and outline the value to participants, sponsoring organizations and to our profession generally.

### **Description of the Mentoring Program**

The Lawyer-to-Lawyer Mentoring Program is designed to elevate the competence, professionalism and success of new lawyers. Because mentoring is education that takes place in the context of a relationship and based on the recommendation of the Commission following a multi-year pilot program and period of study, the Court amended Supreme Court Rule 795 to allow participation in a Commission-approved mentoring program to qualify as non-traditional CLE.

The Commission developed a curriculum and a decentralized administration system for the mentoring program. The curriculum includes alternative activities relating to civility, professionalism, diversity and inclusion, legal ethics, and health and wellness (the substantive areas of the professional responsibility CLE requirement). The activities are supplemented with resources that the individuals may read to develop or deepen understanding of a topic before they come together for the agreed-upon activity.

The administration of the program is shared by the Commission and leaders of the sponsoring organizations (law firms, law schools, bar associations and government agencies). Those in sponsoring organizations, who are familiar with the people and culture of their legal communities, recruit and match mentors and mentees and use the program documents developed by the Commission to orient and support the mentoring pairs.

Mentors (those with six or more years of experience) are paired with new lawyers (those with fewer than three years of experience) for a one-year period. The mentoring pair must hold eight in person meetings during that period, guided by their own mutual selections from the curriculum. At the end of the year-long term, the Commission approves each participant for six professional responsibility CLE credits. More information about the program is available on the Commission's website: [www.2civility.org](http://www.2civility.org) > Mentoring.

### **Benefits to the Mentoring Pair**

Both mentors and mentees have responded enthusiastically to the Program, citing in particular the structured flexibility which allows the program to be tailored to the interests of the mentoring pair. Many participants have expressed their lack of familiarity with some of the professionalism topics and that they are grateful for the guidance in the written mentoring plan. Both mentors and mentees report having formed a bond that that will extend beyond the end of the formal mentoring term. Surveys show that 97% of mentors and 99% of mentees report planning to maintain the relationship with their mentoring partner after completing the program.

### **Benefits to Sponsoring Organizations**

#### **Bar Associations**

A mentoring program can provide a variety of benefits to bar associations, including providing a vehicle for attracting new members to the organization and integrating them into the association's legal community. Mentoring is a low-cost program that benefits members of all ages, practice settings and practice areas. Running a mentoring program takes some administrative time (on average 10 hours in the first year and fewer in subsequent years) but otherwise is not costly. Coordinating mentoring meetings with other bar association events, such as CLE offerings or networking gatherings, will serve to enhance attendance at other events.

#### **Law Schools**

Law schools report that sponsoring a mentoring program can help keep the law school's newest alums connected to the organization, while assisting them in building their professional network. The program also serves as a reason for the alumni relations staff to contact and involve both newer and more seasoned graduates for a purpose other than requesting monetary contribution. Many lawyers who are not in a position to make a monetary contribution are pleased to be able to make a contribution of their time to a fellow alum.

#### **Law Firms and Government Agencies**

An "internal" program provides a structured way to ensure that younger attorneys learn the norms and culture of the organization from more seasoned practitioners, while building loyalty and camaraderie. Mentoring facilitates lawyers building ties within a department or section, or alternatively, across departments, sections or offices, where otherwise there may be few opportunities to interact. Because the focus is on professionalism, mentoring partners need not be in the same practice area to benefit. The program also is easily adapted to supplement an existing mentoring or professional development program.

### **Benefits to Our Profession**

As lawyers become more connected around professionalism issues to one another, to bar associations, and to the Commission on Professionalism, we are together building a stronger professional community. We nurture our relationships with each other and reignite our passion for serving the public in a meaningful way. Mentoring is a true movement!