

To: House Committee on Judiciary
From: Beth Novotny and Teri Corsones
Date: April 16, 2020 **June 4, 2020 (updates in red)**
Re: VBA Response to COVID-19 Matters

When the Vermont Bar Association was founded in 1878, the first act of the fledgling association was to contribute to a fund for the support of children orphaned by an outbreak of yellow fever. In keeping with its tradition of service to others, today the VBA's motto is "Serving the Public and the Profession". Towards that end, following is a sample of what the VBA has done to date in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Vermont.

- VBA staff began working remotely on March 18 to provide seamless on-line and telephonic access to VBA services such as the Lawyer Referral Service (lawyers provide legal advice for no more than \$25 for the first half hour); **at least one staff now at office and rest working remotely**
- Outreach to members through VBA Connect (on-line communications platform for the 35 VBA sections and divisions) to ascertain impact on members' and public's needs and best way to respond to those needs (**activity in VBA Connect has doubled since start of crisis**)
- Outreach to Governor's office to assist with Vermonters' legal needs in wake of crisis (**on-going**)
- Outreach to Legislature to assist with COVID-19 related legislation (**on-going**)
- Outreach to Judiciary to assist with court needs during crisis (**input into Ramp Up Report; Jury Trial Restarts Committee**)
- Re-scheduled Mid-Year Meeting from March 26-27 to June 11-12 (**all programs now offered via webinar; online elections of Board officers scheduled for June 12**)
- Worked closely with Secretary of State to develop Emergency Rules for Remote Notarization and Guidance in implementing the Rules (**remote notary volunteers in place**)
- Proposed emergency legislation in response to crisis, including bills to enable the remote signing of wills, powers of attorney, deeds and advance directives for health care; extension of statutes of limitations; and including members' testimony regarding eviction and foreclosure moratorium (**Acts 94, 95 and 101; H.950**)
- Convened weekly conference calls with Section and Division Chairs and County Bar Presidents to achieve coordinated line of communication from the bar to the Judiciary, the Legislature and to the Governor's Office (**on-going**)
- Convened weekly conference calls with Vermont Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul Reiber, Chief Trial Judge Brian Grearson and Court Administrator Pat Gabel to provide input into and feedback about the Court's emergency Administrative Order 49 and amendments (**on-going**)
- Created ad hoc VBA COVID-19 Committee to ascertain what COVID-19 issues are impacting lawyers and their clients, to provide guidance regarding those issues, to provide COVID-19 resources to the bar including wellness resources, and to recommend how the bar can answer the Governor's call to serve the larger Vermont community (**on-going weekly conference calls**)
- Established COVID-19 Resource Page on VBA website to provide continually updated information on the Governor's emergency orders, the Court's emergency administrative orders, emergency rules and legislation, remote learning opportunities, employer resources, mental health and wellness resources and general resources (**here's a [LINK](#)**)

- Providing remote learning opportunities through webinars about remote legal offices, SBA relief programs, wellness practices and foreclosure mediation trainings (regular webinar CLE offerings – here's a [LINK](#))
- Working closely with Access to Justice Coalition to ascertain best ways to provide COVID-19 legal services to low-income Vermonters (recent \$150,000 ask approved)
- Working closely with Vermont Legal Aid, Legal Services Vermont and other providers to establish a hotline for Vermonters with COVID-19 legal needs (LSV intake number 1-800-889-2047 serves as the hotline)
- Tracking Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) Guidance to keep abreast of allowable legal service activities (worked with Task Force to get approval for up to 25 per law office)
- Working closely with VLCT and Municipal Clerks and Treasurer's Association and Real Property Section to ensure safe and reasonable access to land records during crisis (health and safety measures now in place to ensure safe access to land records)
- Exploring ways to move forward with land records digitization process (Digitization of Land Records Committee working to seek CARES monies for immediate digitization)
- Organized series of on-line foreclosure mediation trainings in anticipation of upsurge in foreclosures resulting from crisis (69 practitioners trained)
- Provided conference call capability to each county bar association, to facilitate communication amongst county bar members (many county bar associations utilizing the numbers)
- Exploring the possibility of volunteer lawyers serving as remote notaries when needed (now have volunteer remote notaries in place, along with lawyers offering discounted or free legal services for essential workers, volunteer lawyers assisting low-income Vermonters with stimulus check applications, and volunteer lawyers and law firms helping Vermonters without access to printers and copiers with printing and copying needs)
- Moved up the annual Lawyers Fighting Hunger Food Drive, held in conjunction with the Attorney General's Office and VT Foodbank in September, to the two week period beginning June 12, 2020