

Illinois Judges Association puts its charity section into motion

By John Flynn Rooney
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The Illinois Judges Association is jump-starting its charitable arm.

The association, comprising about 1,000 active and retired Illinois jurists, has committed \$200,000 to fund the Illinois Judges Association Foundation, said Cook County Associate Judge Jesse G. Reyes, the IJA's current president. The funds represent income from dues and donations from members.

The IJA is "an organization that in great part exists for the benefit of active judges," Reyes said. "The foundation, on the other hand, will be philanthropic in nature."

The foundation was created, in name only, seven years ago, Reyes said.

This year, the association's leadership drafted bylaws and officials are seeking nominations for board members. They hope to have a total of 28 active and retired jurists on the board by June 1, Reyes said.

"While we don't have a lot of money, we can try to model the activities on the Illinois Bar Foundation," said 2d Judicial Circuit Judge James M. Wexssten, the IJA's immediate past president, referring to the charitable arm of the Illinois Bar Association. "There are a lot of worthy causes that need some seed money, some operational money, that we think we can help with."

An example of a possible foundation beneficiary is the expansion of the Judicial Intern Opportunity Program, through which minority law school students work with trial judges throughout the state, Wexssten said.

The foundation might provide financial assistance to not-for-profit groups that provide pro bono representation to indigent clients, Reyes said.

The foundation could also provide law school scholarships for needy students, he added. Since 2000, the IJA has annually presented the Judge Harold W. Sullivan Scholarship to Promote Judicial Ethics on a rotating basis to Illinois law

schools. The \$5,000 scholarships are in the name of a jurist who helped create the IJA and who stressed judicial ethics and education.

"Now the concept is to use some funds that have been surplus to the budgeted sums that we spent to get the foundation up and self-supporting, after which there will be a full-bore education and solicitation campaign," said Chief 9th Circuit Judge Stephen C. Mathers of Galesburg, another past IJA president.

The foundation does face some unusual challenges. The Illinois Code of Judicial Conduct prohibits active judges from soliciting funds, and the foundation is expected to accept donations from outside sources, Reyes said.

"Due to the fact that this is a judges' association, we'll have to review where these funds come from," Reyes said. "We have to be careful that the donations are coming from organizations and entities [that] will appear not to present any type of conflict of interest."

For instance, the foundation is not expected to accept donations from special-interest groups, Reyes said.

IJA officials want an operational foundation as an option for some of the things the association itself can't get involved with, Reyes said.

"Sometimes, the association receives requests for funding that we're not able to comply with because of a potential conflict of interest," Reyes said.

Retired jurists will solicit donations to the foundations, according to Reyes.

Cook County Circuit Judge Patrick E. McGann, another past IJA president, embraced the current philanthropic plan.

"Judges not only preside over cases, they are a positive force for our community," McGann said.

"I think that the more our fellow citizens understand that, they'll have greater confidence in the work that we do on a daily basis," he said. "And they won't readily accept criticisms that are made by people seeking to advance political or economic agendas."