

by **Seth Chavez**

The Nation's First

LRIS helps thousands of callers with legal problems find attorneys

ONE WAY THAT LACBA has contributed to the legal profession is by creating the very first lawyer referral service in the United States. Seventy-five years ago, LACBA established what is now known as the Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS) so that members of the public could rely on a trusted source to find the right lawyer. Now, lawyer referral services across the country serve millions of Americans. LACBA's LRIS is the largest of its kind in United States and remains committed to providing a superior public service.

In 2012, LRIS assisted over 100,000 members of the public with referrals to lawyers and free information about basic legal issues. A large percentage of these assists included directing members of the public to the correct resource, thereby greatly improving the administration of justice and access to justice for members of the public. Members of LRIS's panel of attorneys also enjoyed thousands of vetted referrals.

A Banner Year

During its 75th anniversary year, LRIS took giant leaps toward improving its service to the public and the profession. Since the late 1980s, LACBA has recognized the importance of technical systems to provide improved services to lawyers and to the public. In May 2012, LRIS unveiled entirely new technical systems. LACBA's commitment to technology and this upgrade of lawyer referral systems translates into greatly enhanced services to participating lawyers and members of the public who are seeking information or a referral to an attorney.

Another major step taken by LRIS in

2012 was the geographic expansion of the service to San Bernardino County. In 2010 and 2011, in order to improve access to justice and to LACBA's public service, LACBA's president, Eric Webber, and Executive Director Sally Suchil backed the effort to expand the LRIS's reach to San Bernardino County.

Under California State Bar regulations, for many years LRIS was limited to referring cases only to lawyers in Los Angeles County. Although members of the public throughout California had access to the service, the limited scope of the State Bar certification meant that LRIS was useful primarily to members of the public in Los Angeles County. In October 2012, however, the California State Bar issued certification to LACBA in San Bernardino County.

After a breathtaking hit to court funding in Los Angeles County, LRIS began an effort in 2011 to assist the courts. W. Clark Brown, associate executive director and general counsel of LACBA, led a group to pursue the implementation of the so-called limited-scope representation offerings of LRIS. After several months of groundwork, the bench and the bar agreed that LACBA could have a positive impact on the courts by engaging pro se clients. In 2012, many new attorneys were added to the referral service roster to take limited-scope referrals.

At the heart of LACBA's efforts to enhance LRIS is LACBA's LRIS Advisory Committee. This group works closely with LRIS to advise on operations, including finance, recruitment, peer review, and qualifications standards. In recent years, under the leadership of **Stephen Holzer**, this committee has undertaken a considerable amount of work to advance LRIS.

The committee has gone through rules changes in 2010 and 2011, and it is looking at more adjustments to the rules in 2013. The committee also handles escalated discipline issues that are related to attorneys who receive referrals from LACBA and important adjustments to the qualifications standards required to receive referrals in particular practice areas.

Lawyers in Southern California have also been a great resource for LRIS. Some attorneys take referrals from LRIS; others benefit by referring clients to it. A good percentage of clients are referred to the service by law firms. Because LRIS reviews each lawyer who is a candidate for the service's panel for experience, good standing, insurance, and many other professional requirements, and because the service has a strong client satisfaction review program, law firms and lawyers can refer cases to the service with confidence. Proceeds from referrals support the many good works of LACBA, including the Domestic Violence Project, the Immigration Project, and the AIDS Legal Services Project, all of which provide pro bono services to some of the most vulnerable and needy in the Los Angeles community.

LRIS has had a significant impact on the community and the profession in its 75 years of service. Since its inception, lawyer referral has become a strong public service force throughout the country. With new systems upgrades and geographic expansion, LRIS is poised to serve an even greater portion of lawyers and California residents with a service that provides appropriate access to justice. ■

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