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CALL FOR JUSTICE

Thomas Fraser and Michael Unger

For Twin Cities lawyers Thomas Fraser and Michael Unger, spearheading the startup of a legal services telephone hotline for one-stop shopping has been a six-year journey.

Their persistence has paid off in raising \$500,000 for the new nonprofit hotline service, Call for Justice.

The project is the combined effort of the Hennepin and Ramsey county bar associations and foundations and Call for Justice. Half the funds were contributed by the bar foundations, another 30 percent by Minnesota law firms, and 20 percent by the Bigelow Foundation and the St. Paul Foundation.

Both men point out that many people have helped make Call for Justice a reality in generating its first three years of operating funds. Still, the two men have been its key drivers. Fraser is its president; Unger serves on its board.

In 2006, Unger, then president of the Hennepin County Bar, asked Fraser to head a task force to look at how the legal community could improve access to the legal system for indigent people. One idea: set up a one-stop legal hotline.

After some initial groundwork in 2007, Fraser's group learned that the United Way already has its own hotline (211) to handle social services calls and make referrals.

"We were stunned they (United Way) were getting 40,000 calls a year from people looking for legal help," Fraser says.

The task force discovered that the United Way was not equipped to handle such a large volume of calls and didn't have a complete and up-to-date legal services database to make referrals.

"You have this huge (legal aid) network, but there is no coordination or overarching way to keep track of it all," Unger says. "It's like a bicycle wheel. We have all these spokes, but the hub is missing. Call for Justice is designed to be the hub to connect all the spokes."

Ultimately, the task force recommended the legal community team up with the United Way to upgrade its referral database and then tap volunteer attorneys to staff the hotline and make referrals or, in some cases, offer legal advice.

Following the task force's recommendations, the two bar association foundations issued a \$250,000 matching fundraising challenge. Unger, Fraser and their volunteers first raised \$150,000 from 25 law firms.

"Virtually no law firms turned us down," Fraser says.

Then the Fraser/Unger team raised the remaining \$100,000 from the Bigelow and St. Paul foundations.

Fraser said the fundraising began in 2009 and was completed in early 2011.

Unger said that effort was impressive given the sluggish economy. "When you start something new, the worry is that there is one more group trying to share in splitting the pie," he says. "We wanted to help other legal (aid) providers but not encroach on their fundraising."

Now Call for Justice is starting some operations. Ellen "Ellie" Krug, the first executive director at Call for Justice, took office in December and is working from the United Way's Minneapolis headquarters. She has hired an administrative assistant, who is expected to start work by Feb. 1.

Krug, a longtime Iowa attorney who recently moved to the Twin Cities, hopes to have the hotline running this year. Upward of two dozen attorneys are expected to volunteer to staff the service, Unger predicted.

Until now, Unger and Fraser have kept a low profile with Call for Justice.

"We didn't know if it would be successful," Unger says. "It is really exciting to come to the end of this long run knowing we have the resources to make this happen."

— Scott Carlson