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Quarles firm honored for its work with homeless

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Quarles & Brady LLP partner Janine M. Landow-Esser, who focuses her practice on environmental and OSHA law, likes to say she has learned to make soup for 200 people.

"I can make a lot of things for 200 people — it's a new skill I've acquired," she said, laughing.

It's a skill that has nothing to do with the focus of her law practice. Rather, preparing meals for hundreds of people at a time is a skill that's been sharpened with Landow-Esser's involvement in her firm's community outreach initiative with The Night Ministry.

The non-denominational, nonprofit organization, which was founded in 1976, uses its staff and volunteers to hit the streets of Chicago with a mission to provide basic supplies, self-care supplies, free health care and other support services to youths and adults facing such daily challenges as homelessness, poverty, abuse, loneliness and neglect.

Quarles & Brady's Chicago attorneys and staff have been devoting time and resources to The Night Ministry's programs, including its Outreach and Health Ministry Program, which features a customized bus that travels to Chicago neighborhoods at night, offering support to people in need.

The firm's Chicago office has been engaged in the project for the past four years through Quarles Cares, a firmwide hands-on volunteer initiative that aims to encourage commitment to civic and charitable efforts, Landow-Esser said. The initiative, she said, includes a two-pronged focus: education and hunger.

And Landow-Esser, who had been volunteering on her own with The Night Ministry, said she thought its project that has volunteers pre-arranging and serving meals alongside The Night Ministry's health outreach bus would be a perfect fit for a community service project addressing hunger, when she suggested it to her firm.

"It's a little more hands-on, as opposed to sitting on a board or using the other skills lawyers have — which are admirable; we do that, too. But this is really working directly with the community," she said.



Lawyers and staff from Quarles & Brady LLP prepare sandwiches for clients of The Night Ministry, an organization that provides medical services, counseling, meals and other services and supplies to youth and adults in their neighborhoods. The law firm was recently honored for its contributions to the Chicago organization.

The firm this week was honored by The Night Ministry with the 2010 Lamp Lighter Award, which recognizes a business, a charitable organization and a volunteer each year during its Lighting up the Night benefit, for their contributions in assisting The Night Ministry with its mission "to provide housing, outreach, spiritual and medical services to individuals who are on the streets at night, homeless or precariously housed," said Paul W. Hamann, the organization's president.

Alongside The Night Ministry's signature 38-foot-long, 13-foot-tall blue and white bus — which is equipped with a medical room with an examination table and a hospitality area — the firm's lawyers and staff hit the streets on a quarterly basis to bring food to people in Humboldt Park.

"We shop for it, pay for it, and make it, and then bring it out and serve it," said Landow-Esser, co-chair of the firm's diversity committee. "It's a little more involved than just show up and hand out food."

It's also more involved than writing a check, said D. Scott Watson, the managing

partner of the firm's Chicago office.

The managing partner has been among the volunteers on the street.

"Anybody can write a check. Too often, we do that and think: I've done my duty," Watson said.

Serving up food and conversation to people in the community is "interesting, it's fun, and it is incredibly rewarding," he said.

The experience is also enlightening, Watson said.

"These people are very grateful, but you get to see what the situation is like out here in Chicago," he said. "These are people who can use the assistance."

The Night Ministry's Hamann said the firm, as a corporate team, showed its commitment "from the top, down" and was honored because of its consistency.

"They have really become, through their work, an important part of our clients' lives," said Hamann, who added that volunteers from the firm also assist with the organization's youth outreach program in Lakeview.

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And, Hamann said: “They provide an invaluable service. We know we can count on them to be out on the streets with us. That is a wonderful thing for our outreach staff, to provide more incentive for people to come visit us. The food is not only important in itself, but it’s also an incentive to get individuals to come to us to receive services.

“When you serve a meal, there’s community built around a meal. So many of the individuals whom we serve are without families and other relationships in their lives,” Hamann said. “When they come to our outreach bus, that community becomes an important source of support for them, and Quarles & Brady has helped to make that happen.”

The firm’s managing partner said the hands-on project with The Night Ministry turned out to be a good choice for the firm, when leaders were looking for a community service project to support.

“We did it with the idea of: if we’re not getting involvement we’d look at something else,” Watson said. “And our people have stepped up to the plate every time.”

And, Landow-Esser said, because of the nature and time of the tasks involved, the

program provides roles for many different people in the firm, with something they can do at the end of a work day, and into after-hours.

“It keeps the firm running,” she said.

Along with the outings alongside the bus, Landow-Esser said the firm has hosted events in its office to benefit The Night Ministry, which, along with its health outreach program, also provides housing and supportive services to homeless and at-risk youth.

For example, Landow-Esser said, the firm’s Women’s Forum recently hosted a client event in which participants donated items and created “Welcome Home” baby bags for use at the organization’s shelters for mothers and their babies. The firm also hosts projects that have participants assembling hygiene kits that are distributed from The Night Ministry bus.

Each of its outings to serve up food and conversation alongside the bus, involves about 10 volunteers out on the street, an overlapping 10 or so preparing the food beforehand, and another few who do the shopping, Landow-Esser said.

“Out of an office of 70 lawyers, and another 70 or so staff, we do manage to involve a lot of people,” she said.

Handing out meals is one thing, but offering a friendly face for people to talk to is another.

“You make a connection on a level that people on the street don’t usually have, because people avoid them, they don’t want to make eye contact,” Landow-Esser said. “It gives something to the homeless person, but also to the volunteers who are experiencing a human connection — that this person is just like them, except that I’ve been luckier in my life.”

The firm, she said, has never canceled a planned outing.

“We’re out there in the bitter cold, and all weather,” she said. “They’re like the postmen: Neither rain, nor sleet, nor dead of night stops them.

“The philosophy is, the clientele have no choice, some of them, but to be out there. So, The Night Ministry and its volunteers will be there with them. It’s just a: Pitch in and roll up your sleeves, and do something good for the community.”