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Court announces partnerships for mentoring project

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SPRINGFIELD — First-year attorneys in Cook County now have multiple opportunities to earn mandatory continuing legal education (MCLE) credits by participating in approved mentoring programs.

The Illinois Supreme Court today announced the start of mentoring programs at The Chicago Bar Association, the Cook County Bar Association, The John Marshall Law School, Winston & Strawn LLP and other legal organizations in the Cook County Circuit Court's jurisdiction.

"I am extremely excited to promote this invaluable new young lawyer mentoring program, and am grateful to the numerous organizations that have worked together to implement it," said Illinois Supreme Court Justice Mary Jane Theis, at today's announcement event at Winston & Strawn in Chicago. "It is a unique and beneficial partnership not only for those involved in the mentoring process, but for the greater public and for communities we serve."

The court announced last week the start of similar mentoring programs through the DuPage County Bar Association, Northern Illinois University College of Law and other legal organizations in the 2nd Judicial District.

The Supreme Court changed its MCLE rules in late September to award six MCLE credits for participation in approved mentoring programs. Those credits can help substitute for part of the 15-hour basic skills course that was previously required of first-year attorneys.

The 17th Judicial Circuit, which includes Winnebago and Boone counties, was the first circuit to implement a mentoring program approved by the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. Several other circuits now have approved programs as well.

Jayne Rizzo Reardon, executive director of the Commission on Professionalism, said the commission approved 38 mentoring programs across the state so far, including those implemented at law firms, law schools, government agencies, bar associations and more.

Each organization with a mentoring program oversees its program independently, Reardon said. The organizations pair first-year attorneys with more experienced lawyers for a year-long series of meetings, she said. The meetings focus on standard issues like ethics, professionalism and diversity, Reardon said,



(From left to right) Gordon B. Nash Jr., chairman of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism; Jayne Rizzo Reardon, executive director of the Commission on Professionalism; and Paula Hudson Holderman, Winston & Strawn LLP's chief attorney development officer, talked at today's event at Winston & Strawn. The Illinois Supreme Court today announced the start of a local mentoring program.

but participants can also cover topics like the logistics of practicing law.

"New lawyers, having recently graduated from law school, most often do not have practical experience, and they may land somewhere other than where they went to school," Reardon said. "They may not be aware of local practice norms. That transfer of practical knowledge and norms is a really obvious benefit to the new lawyers."

But mentoring also offers benefits to more experienced attorneys who guide younger lawyers, Reardon said.

"What we've seen in studying this in focus groups and elsewhere across the country, is that there is just as much transfer of knowledge going the other way, especially now because technology is so rapidly changing society and the way we practice law," Reardon said. "The newer lawyers grew up with it. It's second nature for them."

Paula Hudson Holderman, chief attorney development officer at Winston & Strawn, said the firm has had a mentoring program for the past 15 years, but the new official mentoring program gives the firm's existing program more structure and specific goals.

"As the model of practicing law has changed and the pricing has changed, clients are not willing to pay \$300 for an associate to tag along on a deposition or go watch a court call to see how it's done," she said. "That is why it has become so important to put together mentoring programs as a sort of separate institution."

John E. Corkery, dean of The John Marshall Law School and a member of the Commission on Professionalism, said mentoring programs provide young lawyers with a model for their behavior and attitudes.

"You really have to have a model in mind to be a professional," Corkery said. "This is more about modeling behavior than it is about getting a list of 10 principles you can put into practice. I think it's learning from watching others who do this in a good way."

Attorney Michael J. Baima, an associate at Reinhart, Boerner, Van Deuren P.C. in Rockford, participated in a mentoring program shortly after being admitted to practice law in November 2009. He said the experience taught him basic skills, helped him network with other attorneys and even led to referrals for work.

"It got me out of my bubble," Baima said. "It was a great way for me to make a good friend."