



Task Force fosters positive consumer relations from multiple angles

BY DEBBIE SWANSON

Recognizing the always evolving nature of the consumer and business relationship, the Massachusetts Bar Association last year created the Consumer Advocacy Task Force, a group focused on protecting consumer rights and acknowledging and promoting consumer-friendly business practices.

Chaired by MBA Vice President Christopher A. Kenney, the group is composed of several attorneys from a mix of backgrounds. Now embarking on its second year together, the task force is well underway with its main objectives.

“The task force’s goals are three pronged,” said Kenney. “First, we’re creating a clearinghouse of information for consumers regarding protection issues. We want to empower the consumer, so they know where to turn when they have a claim — whether it’s the hotline, the state office of consumer protection or the MBA’s Lawyer Referral Service.”

Kenney said that the group has been involved in identifying and creating information, resources, templates and roadmaps to pass along to consumers who aren’t sure where to turn when they have a claim. Once the clearinghouse is up and running on the MBA’s public-facing www.MassLawHelp.com website, the group will continue to review it over the years to ensure that the information distributed remains accurate and current.

Symposium this month

A second effort of the group is to recognize and promote area businesses that make continuous efforts to maintain positive relations with their consumers. Part of this effort is to create a favorable and supportive relationship, rather than interacting with a business only after a dispute has been initiated.

“This is a proactive step, to use positive reinforcement to recognize the businesses that benefit consumers,” said Kenney.

One result of this effort is the creation of the MBA Pinnacle Awards, a new award designed to recognize companies in Massachusetts, large or small, for positive interactions with and commitment to their consumers. To receive the honor, companies must be operat-

ing in good standing in Massachusetts and remain proactive for the benefit of their consumers. The first recipients of the award — Staples Inc., and Dancing Deer Baking Company — were announced this fall. (See related story, page 5.)

The Pinnacle Awards will be awarded as part of the first-ever Consumer Advocacy Symposium, which is scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 29, at Suffolk University Law School in Boston. Kenney said the plan is to make the symposium a yearly event and establish the MBA as a thought leader.

“We’re planning to hold an annual symposium to address cutting edge legal issues around consumer interests, and will feature nationally recognized speakers,” he said.

This year, the symposium topics will center around two major issues: the role played by the Attorney General’s office in consumer protection advocacy, and the possibility of expanding the role that private attorneys play in assisting the Attorney General in consumer protection litigation.

“The Consumer Protection Division of the Attorney General’s office has been in place for many years, and their work has changed over time. We want to make people aware of what they do,” said task force member Andrew Rainer, litigation director at the Public Health Advocacy Institute. For example, Rainer points out that not all consumers are aware of their ability to call the office and discuss the possibility of receiving assistance from a mediator.

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“Some cases can be resolved easily with this kind of intervention, and we want to make sure everyone knows about this,” he said.

Rainer also said the symposium will talk about some of the larger consumer cases the office has litigated in recent years, including foreclosure-related and electronic privacy cases.



The Consumer Advocacy Symposium on Oct. 29 is one of the key efforts of the Consumer Advocacy Task Force. It will also feature the presentation of the MBA Pinnacle Awards.

Another topic scheduled is the possibility of expanding the role private attorneys play in consumer protection cases brought on in behalf of the citizens of Massachusetts. A lively panel discussion is expected to include former Attorney General Scott Harshbarger, who is now senior counsel at Proskauer Rose LLP; former First Assistant Attorney General Dean Richlin, now with the firm of Foley Hoag; Stuart Rossman, litigation director at the National Consumer Law Center; and Kathleen Engel, professor at Suffolk University

Rainer said.

“Attorney Rossman will offer perspectives on the value of *parens patriae* litigation in other forums, and Professor Engel will talk about the viability of *parens patriae* litigation brought on behalf of municipalities, a topic she has been studying,” he added.

The members of the Consumer Advocacy Task Force are excited about their opportunity to inform and positively impact area consumers, and to raise awareness about the bar’s commitment to both consumer interests and upstanding businesses.

Enhancing visibility

“We’re focused on protecting the consumers in the commonwealth,” said Nadine Cohen, task force member and managing attorney with the Consumer Rights Unit of Greater Boston Legal Services. “The group will do a lot to raise the visibility of consumer issues, and make sure the bar remains up to date on consumer cases and current issue.”

Cohen adds that the timing is perfect for such discussions, with the ongoing Attorney General elections.

“The speakers are very knowledgeable and active in consumer issues. It’s a good time to raise awareness and have these important discussions,” she said. ■