**VBA Annual Report 2019-2020**

The VBA Annual Reports cover VBA activities during the September 1 – August 31 time frame. Who would have imagined the challenges we faced together during the second six-months of this reporting period? Thanks to so many members and staff who selflessly dedicated their time and talents to meet those challenges, we are proud to include in this report the different ways your VBA was able to help legal professionals in weathering the pandemic storm.

Immediately after Governor Scott’s declaration of a state-wide emergency on March 13, we established the **“Lawyers’ COVID-19 Resource Page”** on the VBA website to provide a continually updated go-to resource for our members. The Resource Page has links to Governor Scott’s Executive Orders, the Agency of Commerce & Community Development (ACCD) Guidance materials, Judiciary Emergency Orders, Emergency Rules and Legislation, and numerous employer, tech, wellness and general COVID-19 resources.

The **VBA COVID-19 Committee** sprang into action to meet weekly to ensure that the interests of lawyers, law office staff and law students were well-represented during the development of the ACCD professional office re-opening phases, during the Judiciary’s development of its Ramp Up Report and Jury Restart Plan, and during the Legislature’s passage of emergency legislation impacting remote wills, deeds, powers of attorney and advance directives, as well as enhanced life estate deeds. The Committee also worked to develop numerous COVID-19 related volunteer opportunities for lawyers as well as opportunities for bar examinees faced with the challenge of a delayed and remote bar exam.

We also organized weekly **Section/Division Chairs and County Bar Presidents Conference Calls,** whose participantsprovided invaluable input for the ACCD guidance, the Judiciary’s emergency orders, the Legislature’s emergency legislation and critical information for the weekly phone conferences that VBA President Beth Novotny and I had the privilege of holding over the last six months with Chief Justice Reiber, Chief Superior Judge Brian Grearson, CAO Pat Gabel and other members of the Judiciary leadership team.

Also unique to this reporting period was the formation of an **E-File Fees Study Committee** that was created following the initial roll out of the Odyssey e-filing system in April 2020. The Legislature adopted a number of the recommendations in the Committee’s Report in H.951, including requiring the Judiciary to meet with court users to review their experience with the system, and to examine alternatives to the per-use e-filing fee charge. The Judiciary is required to report on the results of the meetings by October 30; in the meantime, the Legislative Committee on Judicial Rules has urged the Judiciary to postpone expansion of the system until the current e-filing issues are addressed.

The **Commission on the Well-Being of the Legal Profession** issued its **First Annual Report** on July 1, detailing what each committee on the Commission has accomplished since the CWBLP State Action Plan was submitted to the Vermont Supreme Court on December 31, 2018. Included in the Report are recommendations regarding important next steps in enhancing the Lawyers Assistance Program.

Thanks to the generosity of so many lawyers and judges who are willing to share their expertise, the VBA was able to offer a full smorgasbord of **CLE Programs** covering the gamut of legal topics, including in-person programs during the first half of the reporting period and remote programs since March. Over 3,600 total registrations show how many of you took advantage of VBA CLE offerings, including 746 registrations for in person programs, 2,102 for webinars, 737 for digital programs and 60 for teleseminars this past year. Many thanks to the amazing VBA section chairs who organized at least one CLE during the year at the Annual Meeting in September, at the Mid-Winter Thaw in January, at the Mid-Year Meeting (originally scheduled in March and re-scheduled and held virtually in June), and during the numerous stand-alone programs held throughout the year. Please don’t hesitate to let us know what CLE offerings you’d like to see offered, or if you’d like to present!

We were pleased to offer the Fourth Annual **VBA Trial Academy** in a modified format due to the pandemic restrictions in place in July. Five trial judges and participating veteran trial practitioners offered individual webinars geared to different aspects of trial practice. Stay tuned for the Fifth Annual Trial Academy in the Summer of 2021!

VBA Members have automatic access to **Casemaker**, a leading legal research services provider with intuitive search capabilities.  Casemaker 4 is available with faster searching capabilities and a new “user friendly” design—just update your default choice to Casemaker 4. Now the jurisdiction selection menu is on every page and results can be searched by court level. All personalization options have been expanded, including billing folders and annotations. The website includes detailed information about the latest enhancements, and benefits of Casemaker for your research. The tutorial videos in the “help” section of the Casemaker website are concise and informative, or you can call or email Jennifer Emens-Butler for personal Casemaker training!

VBA membership includes unlimited access to section activity through our on-line communication platform “**VBA Connect.**” Developed in response to members’ requests for the ability to archive and to search the invaluable information shared among section members, VBA Connect allows members to control the frequency of received posts, and to easily search and retrieve whatever information has been shared in all communities to date. VBA Connect has been an especially convenient way for members to stay abreast of the ever-changing legal landscape during the COVID-19 era. You can join any section with the click of a button, and easily set delivery preferences. If you haven’t yet experienced the benefits of VBA Connect, please call or e-mail the VBA office at any time for personal training.

We’re honored to work closely with all three branches of the Vermont Government, to ensure that your and your clients’ interests are well-represented. The VBA serves as a resource to the Legislature, government agencies and the Judiciary which helps insure our members’ needs are considered. The VBA monitors the legislative sessions for any proposals affecting our members and helps coordinate testimony from section chairs and members when needed. Towards that end, we were pleased to co-host “**Legislators’ Days**” with the Judiciary in each of the fourteen counties throughout the Fall. County legislative delegations were invited to their local state courthouses to observe court hearings, and to meet with judicial officers and lawyer “ambassadors” from each division. Those events were followed by a VBA Legislators’ Reception in January at the statehouse (the annual Legislators’ Breakfast in March was cancelled due to the statehouse closure just before the scheduled event.) Many thanks also to the ambassadors, to the section chairs, and to many other members who offered invaluable testimony during the initial and then the special legislative session, when needed.

**VBA Access to Justice** initiatives have proved invaluable to disadvantaged Vermonters this past fiscal year. Our projects use grant funds to pay private attorneys a stipend of $60 per hour with a capped number of hours per case to represent low income Vermonters and crime victims. We now have 142 attorneys on our low bono referral panels, an increase due to recruiting efforts by the Young Lawyers Division and our own foreclosure defense outreach. The Vermont Bar Foundation funds our county low bono projects statewide. Case referrals—mostly landlord/tenant matters-- slowed due to COVID-19 court closures, but we still received 39 cases. The VBA also funds our foreclosure defense project; with this grant, the VBA offered a 3-part webinar on foreclosure defense and mediation in April and doubled the number of low bono foreclosure defense lawyers. We expect a jump in foreclosure cases as our courts slowly reopen. The Vermont Supreme Court funds our statewide low bono projects for representation in adult involuntary guardianships and for PACA negotiations. We paid lawyers in 167 of these cases last year. Finally, with our DOJ VOCA grant, our low bono lawyers represent crime victims in legal matters arising from their victimization. We received 143 requests for help last year but were not able to place them all with low bono attorneys. In all of our low bono projects, private attorneys helped over 300 clients. Counsel not only worked for a greatly reduced hourly fee, but also finished many cases pro bono. **Our lawyers donated a total of 487 pro bono hours to help disadvantaged Vermonters.** Thank you, all! Please consider helping out; contact Mary Ashcroft, Esq., VBA’s Legal Access Coordinator, at mashcroft@vtbar.org.

Our Vermont **Lawyer Referral Service** continues to work well for clients in need of Vermont counsel, and for the 151 LRS panel members who earned more than $1.2 million in LRS revenue this past year!  The VBA fielded 6,119 LRS requests, averaging 510 requests per month.  We printed and distributed VBA business cards with the LRS 800 number, the VT Free Legal Answers website, and the “Modest Means” website to all of the Vermont state courthouses, numerous public libraries, and many veteran centers throughout Vermont. If you’re not already an LRS member, consider joining for the low cost of $70.00 per year. Your next big case could be an LRS referral!

A continuing focus in the arena of public education was to encourage lawyer presentations in conjunction with **Constitution Day** in September. The VBA has now provided over 5,000 copies of “Pocket Constitutions” for lawyers and judges to distribute at presentations they give to school and civic groups throughout the state. We were pleased to organize a fifth annual Constitution Day Panel Presentation, with an esteemed panel including a justice, trial judges and a Vermont Law School Constitution Law Professor, moderated by VBA President Elizabeth Novotny. The panel presented a “virtual” one-hour basic overview of the Constitution, with a focus on “Your Voice, Your Vote, Our Democracy”, in conjunction with a celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment. Links to the videos of each Constitution Day presentation are on the VBA website. The VBA is happy to provide this and other resources to whomever would like to make a presentation in their community this year.

The Young Lawyers Division and the VBA Diversity Section organized a **Martin Luther King, Jr. Poster-Essay Contest** for Vermont middle-school students in the Fall. Governor Phil Scott presented awards to the winners at the statehouse in January; the students and their families also toured the statehouse and the Vermont Supreme Court Building, where their winning posters and essays were on public display for the month of January. Materials for the 2021 MLK, Jr. Poster-Essay Contest are going out soon!

The VBA continues to partner with Vermont Law School in the **VBA/VLS Incubator Project**. The project provides support for new lawyers starting solo practices in underserved legal and geographic areas of Vermont. The VBA/VLS team provides day to day mentoring, review of business plans, small start-up grants, referral of pro bono and low bono cases, and weekly check-ins. This year, our incubator lawyers set up practices in Burlington, Fair Haven and Bethel.

Since 2012, the VBA has offered training for and has coordinated the **Foreclosure Mediation Program** where interested lawyers receive specialized training to be foreclosure mediators and agree to be part of a state-wide pool that is offered to eligible litigants who opt for mediation in their foreclosure cases.  In the past year, courts referred 116 foreclosure cases to the VBA for mediators, and 58 foreclosure mediators were agreed upon by the parties and assigned.

As always, we strive to bring you the latest membership products and services, as evidenced by the numerous sponsors and exhibitors at our major meetings, and as detailed in the **“Affinity Partners”** section on the website. Be sure to take advantage of the substantial discounts available for consulting, credit card processing, practice management, health insurance, personal insurances, retirement programs, marketing software, professional liability insurance, rental cars, and shipping services. Our newest partners include EasySoft, Inc., TurboLaw, Red Cave Consulting, healthiestyou, and Smith.ai Virtual Receptionist. We are currently in conversations with other providers of service and will be bringing more options to our members soon.

None of the above accomplishments would have been possible without the hard work and complete dedication of the **incredible VBA team,** whether working at the VBA office, or remotely since March 17! I am deeply indebted to them, as well as to the VBA Board of Managers for providing excellent leadership for your Vermont Bar Association. Please know that we are all at your service (to meet whatever challenges the next reporting period may have in store) and appreciate whatever recommendations you have to bring even more value to your VBA membership.

Teri Corsones

VBA Executive Director