

It Took a Village to Create Award-Winning Access-to-Justice Project: Middle District’s Virtual Bankruptcy Consult Platform Gets Special Recognition from 13th Circuit Pro Bono Committee

By: Hon. Catherine Peek McEwen

[Editor’s note: The following is a revised version of Judge Catherine Peek McEwen’s remarks in presenting the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee’s Special Recognition Award to the Middle District of Florida Bankruptcy Pro Se Assistance Clinic at the committee’s annual awards ceremony in May. (By order of the Supreme Court of Florida, each judicial circuit in the state’s Third Branch has a circuit pro bono committee to promote pro bono service.)]



L to R: Jena Hudson, Barbara Hart, Bankruptcy Judge Catherine Peek McEwen, Kathleen DiSanto, 13th Judicial Circuit Judge Darren Farfante, Michael Barnett, and Chief Bankruptcy Judge Caryl E. Delano

I can’t tell you how pleased I am to showcase the project that is honored with this special award. There are two reasons for my delight: First, the project was sorely needed, as you’ll hear about in a moment. Second, the project is a model for what a group of creative individuals can do, using technology, to bring about pro bono representation in other courts.

As to the first reason, last year — 2022 — the United States Bankruptcy Court for the Middle District of Florida was ranked 5th in the nation out of 90 federal judicial districts for pro se bankruptcy filings per authorized judgeship (this statistic does not count pro se creditors). These pro se individuals frequently need assistance in preparing their bankruptcy schedules and addressing issues that arise in their cases. The high volume of pro se parties appearing in our bankruptcy court is a significant burden on our clerk’s office and creates a disproportionate demand for judicial resources.

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In mid-2022, Judge Jay Brown learned about an undertaking in Orlando for a virtual pro bono consultation platform and thought about taking that concept districtwide. He enlisted the help of Chief Judge Caryl Delano to constitute a districtwide committee to make it happen. She appointed him to chair the committee and tapped Judge Jason Burgess, retired Judge Karen S. Jennemann, me, and bankruptcy practitioners from Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville, and Fort Myers to be members. *[Editor's note: A complete list of the team follows this article.]*

Collaborating in the style of “it takes a village,” it took the districtwide committee only a few months to tackle the challenges of overseeing the creation of a virtual clinic website, which launched Labor Day last year and is found at <https://www.bankruptcyproseclinic.com/>. This online platform — which augments some divisions’ existing but separate walk-in and email clinics — allows attorneys to register as virtual clinic volunteers and gives pro se parties the ability to schedule a free, 30-minute telephone or Zoom consultation with an attorney. In addition, the districtwide committee recruited attorney volunteers to staff the virtual clinic, identified grants and other sources for funding the operation of the virtual clinic, and developed a form notice (modeled after a similar notice that Northern District Bankruptcy Judge Karen Specie created for that district’s pro se filers) that our Court mails to each pro se debtor, advising the debtor of the availability of local pro bono resources, including the virtual clinic. The attorney recruitment piece was headed by Tampa’s Kathleen DiSanto. *[Editor's note: For that reason, she was tapped to accept the award for the districtwide committee at the ceremony; see accompanying pictures.]*

With the support of more than 200 attorneys across the Middle District of Florida, the virtual clinic had served more than 246 clients as of April 30 of this year through virtual or telephonic consultations. *[Editor's note: The count through May 30 was 292 since inception of the clinic.]* As of May 4, we had an astounding 4,562 appointment slots available!

And now to underscore the second reason that I’m happy: The virtual clinic now serves as a template for use by bankruptcy courts across the nation. We think that state courts, state court bar associations, and legal aid agencies can also follow suit.

Congratulations and thanks to our award-winning village of creative thinkers for being pro bono trailblazers in deploying existing technology to deliver access to justice!

Middle District of Florida Bankruptcy Pro Se Clinic Committee

Court Representatives

Judge Jacob A. Brown

Judge Catherine Peek McEwen

Judge Jason A. Burgess

Judge Karen S. Jennemann

Kameron Fleming
Jodie Hollingsworth
José Rodriguez
Michael Schumpert

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