

# Supporting and Building Lasting Partnerships

■ **By Josh Materese**

If you ask most lawyers who are not actively engaged in pro bono work where their reservations lie, the answer is almost never a lack of interest. Instead, they cite concerns over time and capacity, or apprehension about taking personal responsibility for clients — particularly at-risk clients — in subject matters or areas of the law that are outside of their comfort zones.

We confronted the same concerns about a year ago, just before we expanded our pro bono group. How could we best prepare our lawyers to help the most vulnerable communities in ways that were meaningful, effective, and outside our areas of expertise? The Homeless Advocacy Project's (HAP) SOAR Project was the perfect fit.

HAP provides free legal services to Philadelphians experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Volunteers with HAP's SOAR (SSI, Outreach, Access, and Recovery) Project work to secure their clients' life-altering federal disability benefits on an expedited basis. In almost all cases, these individuals suffer from extensive mental health conditions, such as PTSD, bipolar disorder,

schizophrenia, or chronic depression. They need help, and they need it quickly.

HAP has had tremendous success since SOAR's inception, delivering benefits to over 3,000 Philadelphians. This success stems in large part from HAP's well-organized and clearly defined process, as well as the premium they put on supporting and mentoring their volunteers throughout cases.

Our experience has certainly borne this out. At the outset, HAP provided our lawyers with a training run by several of HAP's most experienced advocates, including Patrick McNeil, who has become our close ally. HAP also created a step-by-step online guide through the lifecycle of a SOAR case, complete with all the necessary case forms and materials. From there, HAP provided (and continues to provide) weekly "office hours"—time Patrick has set aside for our lawyers to meet (virtually) and talk case-specific strategy or about roadblocks they are facing.

These tools have been invaluable to our lawyers' experiences and made us comfortable and confident advocating for their clients. And there is no shortage of direct client contact, which is an immeasurable

benefit for junior attorneys, who can run cases from start to finish. Moreover, because the typical lifecycle of a SOAR case is 60 to 90 days, it not only promotes engagement and participation, but means advocates are able to deliver tangible results quickly.

All of this is not to say that this work is easy, substantively or emotionally. The cases are challenging, and the clients have experienced unimaginable trauma. No two stories are the same. But because of the emphasis that HAP places on educating and guiding volunteers, particularly at the get-go, whatever hours lawyers can contribute are spent not on logistical complications, but on building a relationship with their clients and making a difference on a recurring basis. The results are real. Through our partnership with HAP, we have secured thousands of dollars in monthly benefits for our clients and look forward to continuing to serve.

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