Latham Aids Social Entrepreneurs With Unique Pro Bono Clinic

By Andrew Strickler

Law360, New York (May 30, 2014, 5:46 PM ET) -- Entrepreneurs building socially conscious businesses may be ignorant of the thorny legal issues that can derail their well-meaning projects — a problem a group of Latham & Watkins LLP attorneys hope to solve with a new pro bono program.

The Social Entrepreneurship Legal Clinic, held in April at the firm’s Washington, D.C., offices, matched panels of Latham lawyers, most of them in transactional practices, with entrepreneurs seeking help turning socially-conscious plans to support things like community health and clean-water technology into live businesses.

“To me, it was inspirational to get together with this interesting and energetic set of clients and help them think through their problems from a legal perspective,” said Cynthia Weiss, 36, a sixth-year Latham finance associate who led the program’s development. “I could see how our skills added value to their enterprises face to face, and have ideas come out directly through those conversations.”

The idea for the social entrepreneur clinic was born in 2012 at a meeting with Ashoka, an international organization that supports social entrepreneurship through fellowships and other programs. At that meeting, Weiss said, she was challenged to think of a new way transactional lawyers could get more involved in supporting social entrepreneurs pro bono.

“We thought it be helpful for [Ashoka] fellows to have a legal health check, the opportunity to take their legal pulse,” Weiss said. Particularly for people in the first stage of planning a new project to address a social problem “maybe you’re concentrated on developing your product and haven’t thought of the legal regulations that will affect your projects, what you will need to do to be in compliance or in your corporate form.”

Over several months, the Latham team designed and held training sessions for lawyers geared toward legal issues that social entrepreneurs would likely face: Creating a nonprofit/for-profit hybrid structure, for example, or compliance and intellectual property issues for Internet-based projects. The idea was also expanded to include any potential entrepreneurs, not just Ashoka fellows.

Weiss, along with Latham project finance associate M. Greg Braswell, also designed with the help of project partner DC Bar an application covering things like staff, funding sources, and requested legal services.
That screening process, Weiss said, was an important part of limiting the clinic to only organizations with a clear social cause, even if the project weren’t strictly nonprofit.

“There are already small-business clinics ... and we were developing this specifically as a social entrepreneur clinic, and that’s what fit within our pro bono program,” she said.

In the end, eight entrepreneurs were matched with teams of three or four Latham associates, most of them transactional lawyers.

Clinic clients, nearly all of them in early planning stages, included a number of people seeking advice for community nutrition and health programs.

One clinic client needed pro bono help related to a firm that would itself support social entrepreneurship. A group of D.C.-based graduate students also received legal advice for a project focused on portable, self-powered water desalination technology.

All together, about 30 Latham associates participated in the one-day clinic, which was scheduled at firm offices on a post-tax season weekday — all the better to maximize associate participation, Weiss said.

Latham public service counsel Wendy Atrokhov credited Weiss and Braswell with being proactive in launching a project that built on the firm’s decadeslong relationship with Ashoka, one she hopes will be a model for other offices in the U.S. and overseas. Future sessions in D.C. are also expected.

“It required a lot of diligence and creativity and bravery to start something new and untested, and I think this reflects the importance of thinking big about what we do here in terms of pro bono,” she said. “From a global standpoint, we’re looking at it with a lot of interest as something that could be replicated elsewhere.”

Pro Bono Spotlight is a recurring Law360 series profiling law firm pro bono efforts.

--Editing by Chris Yates.