

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAWYERS WITHOUT BORDERS: CROSSING BORDERS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) come in all shapes and sizes. However, they usually have something in common: they are geographically located near concentrations of power. In the United States, this usually means Washington D.C. or New York City.

Lawyers Without Borders, Inc. (commonly called LWOB) was incorporated in Connecticut on March 1, 2000 and its primary offices are in Hartford, Connecticut. While Hartford is the capitol of Connecticut, people outside of Connecticut tend to overlook it. From the beginning, LWOB was supported by the Connecticut Bar Association's Section of International Law & Practice and strongly supported by Byrne & Storm, P.C. Christina Storm was the founding executive director of LWOB.

LWOB strove to match resources with needs, regardless of where the resource and the need were located. A number of pools of talent were recognized early on; younger lawyers and more senior lawyers with experience that could be applied in different circumstances. Recognizing Connecticut was a bit out of the way for many wanting to help, LWOB focused its organizing efforts

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through the internet. LWOB is very much a virtual organization because of the way it communicates, galvanizes and harnesses legal resources.

II. PROJECT

Over the years LWOB has undertaken a number of projects. Some of the projects have been large and some have been small. Each project has reflected LWOB's desire to connect resources with needs. While it is not possible to discuss all of LWOB's projects, a representative list can be shown.

III. FINGERPRINTS

One of the first virtual projects came from Yugoslavia. As criminal trials under the new regime commenced, the local bar did not know how to examine fingerprint experts. Fingerprint evidence was not commonly used under the old regime. Fingerprint evidence was being used under the new regime as part of the criminal prosecution.

A local Yugoslavian lawyer requested assistance from LWOB. LWOB located a Canadian criminal attorney with substantial experience in cross examining fingerprint experts who was willing to assist the Yugoslavian lawyer. While the Canadian lawyer did not leave his office, he was able to effectively assist another lawyer in Yugoslavia through the use of the internet.

IV. NEUTRAL INDEPENDENT COURT TRIAL OBSERVER PROJECT

In some countries and some proceedings, a court proceeding is not open to the public. LWOB has sent observers to watch closed trials in Tehran and Pakistan. LWOB contacts the governments involved before sending the observers. The ground rules are agreed upon in advance and differ from many NGOs.

LWOB observers will not report their finding and observations in public. They will report their findings, observations and recommendations to the government in question. The emphasis is cooperation rather than confrontation. The objective is to fix the problem rather than to create publicity. Under these circumstances, LWOB has been able to observe trials no other NGO has been able to observe.

V. INS DETAINEE PROJECT

Since September 11, 2001, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of immigration detainees within the United States. Simply put, the federal government does not have enough space to house all of the detainees. This means some detainees are being held in state facilities under contract to the federal government.

There are comprehensive regulations on holding such detainees (because they are not incarcerated criminals). While the federal government may be well versed in these rules, the states are not. In response to inquiries from various people, LWOB teamed up with the American Bar Association to conduct inspections in Connecticut and Massachusetts. LWOB's report resulted in some changes in how detainees were being held.

VI. PROVIDING BOOKS

When the United States invaded Iraq, it committed itself to reopening universities and teaching. A number of courses were taught on United States Constitutional Law, but there was a critical shortage of books and teaching materials.

LWOB provided a number of copies of the United States Constitution and the federalist papers for several law schools in Northern Iraq. When it was pointed out that a number of students felt more comfortable reading this material in Arabic rather than English, LWOB located reliable Arabic translations of the United States Constitution and the federalist papers in Brooklyn Public Library. Copies were made (with the appropriate copyright permissions) and sent to Iraq.

VII. CENTRALIZED BULLETIN BOARD FOR JOBS AND INTERNSHIPS

One of the difficulties has been locating opportunities for those with an interest in pro bono (and paying!) work. LWOB launched (with the assistance of JobTarget.com) a jobs board in February 2004 that allowed the anonymous posting of resumes (people looking for opportunities) as well as the traditional posting of job listings. The job board is free to job seekers and free for a period of time for employers wishing to test the system. The first major employer to enlist the system for his human resource needs was the International Criminal Court. This jobs board was a "first" of its type for rule of law, transitional justice, and legally oriented capacity building jobs.

VIII. NGO ACCREDITATION

LWOB has been an accredited NGO with the United Nations Department of Public Information for some time. It was recently accredited to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (one of the five principal organs of the United Nations). This provides a greater opportunity for LWOB to contribute to the work of the United Nations.

IX. CONCLUSION

LWOB is a relatively new NGO. Its emphasis is on connecting people to make a difference. Unlike the traditional NGO, this means LWOB offers exceptional opportunities to its volunteers. We hope you will become one of those volunteers.