Developing and Implementing a Statewide, Voluntary 
Lawyer-to-Lawyer Mentoring Program

A Case Study from the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism

May 2014

The Illinois Supreme Court created the Commission on Professionalism in late 2005 to promote among judges and lawyers the principles of professionalism, civility and integrity. In 2010, upon the recommendation of the Commission, the Court modified the Illinois Minimum Continuing Legal Education rules to allow attorneys to earn their required professional responsibility CLE credit by “completing a year-long mentoring program approved by the Commission on Professionalism.”  

Illinois, a state without a unified bar, has well over 90,000 active licensed attorneys located over a wide geographic area that includes small rural communities, mid-size cities, sprawling suburbs and of course the City of Chicago. The challenge presented to the Commission was how to develop, promote and administer a voluntary lawyer-to-lawyer mentoring program throughout such a large, diverse and dispersed legal community within the constraints of a small staff and limited budget.

The Commission ran a pilot program, gathered feedback, conducted research, and generated template documents. It developed a program built around the requirements of the professional responsibility CLE requirement that serves as a template for any organization that wishes to offer a mentoring program that will qualify for professional responsibility CLE credit.

The key innovation of the program from the Commission’s perspective, given the large number of Illinois attorneys and small staff, was decentralization. The Commission itself does not “run” a mentoring program per se; it “approves” mentoring programs that are administered by Sponsoring Organizations such as law firms, law schools, bar associations and law departments. These organizations typically adopt the program and use the materials developed by the Commission and follow the established requirements for earning CLE credit. Individuals at the Sponsoring Organizations (the Program Administrators) will promote their program, collect and process applications from interested attorneys, match the mentoring pairs, hold an orientation and otherwise oversee the program at their organization. Commission staff collaborates with and supports the individual Sponsoring Organizations and Program Administrators throughout the process.

Started as a pilot program in a single judicial circuit, the program is now being administered by over 75 organizations throughout the state. More than 2,000 attorneys have participated in the program.

Attached is a broad outline of the Commission’s processes and experience with its program.

1 Illinois Supreme Court Rule 795(d)(11).
Outline of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism’s Development and Implementation of a Statewide, Voluntary Lawyer-to-Lawyer Mentoring Program

I. PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT 2009-2011

A. Researched and reviewed other mentoring programs, materials and best practices.
   1. Assembled materials from other jurisdictions, performed outreach to and meetings with administrators of those programs.
   2. Developed a prototype mentoring plan to define activities and educational resources tailored to the specific requirements of the Illinois professional responsibility requirement.2

B. Launched a small pilot program and evaluated results and feedback
   1. Collaborated with Illinois’ 17th Judicial Circuit to launch a year-long mentoring program with a limited number of lawyers as part of a larger professionalism initiative.3
   2. At the conclusion of the year, Commission representatives assembled focus groups of mentors and mentees and court personnel to evaluate the program’s strengths and weaknesses.

C. Based on the pilot program, the Commission made a recommendation to the Illinois Supreme Court to modify continuing legal education rules to allow completion of a structured, year-long mentoring program approved by the Commission on Professionalism to qualify for professional responsibility CLE credit. In September 2011, the Court adopted the recommendation and amended the rules accordingly.

D. To develop implementation procedures applicable to the entire state, the Commission formed a statewide Mentoring Advisory Committee comprised of members of the bench, bar and legal education community. Bringing diverse perspectives of their respective legal communities to bear, program requirements and materials were revised, and a strategy was developed for obtaining feedback on proposed implementation procedures and to obtain eventual buy-in. The key takeaways from the Advisory Committee:
   1. Program administration would be decentralized; “Sponsoring Organizations” (e.g. law firms, bar associations, law schools, etc.) would adopt and use the materials and satisfy the requirements established by the Commission; Sponsoring Organizations would recruit attorneys, match mentoring pairs, conduct orientation and manage program through completion.
   2. Attorneys must hold a minimum number of meetings (8+), at least one within each of the five professionalism categories, to qualify for CLE credit;

   2 Illinois Supreme Court Rule 794(d) defines the professional responsibility CLE requirement as including the five areas of: professionalism, diversity issues, mental illness and addiction issues, civility, and legal ethics.
   3 In large part due to the innovations and success with their mentoring program as part of its overall professionalism initiative, in 2012 the 17th Judicial Circuit, along with the Winnebago and Boone County Bar Associations in that jurisdiction, received the prestigious Gambrell Professionalism Award from the American Bar Association’s Standing Committee on Professionalism.
3. The Commission should establish and publish requirements for participating in the program and qualifying for CLE Credit (e.g., maximum # of years of admission to participate as a mentee, minimum # of years of admission for mentors, lack of disciplinary record, etc.)

4. Attorneys must participate in an orientation at start of program to advise them of program requirements and for mentoring pairs to decide on their mentoring plan.

E. With the assistance of Advisory Committee members, the Commission drafted and assembled program materials that eventually were made available on the website:
   1. Purpose/Mission Statement
   2. Guide for Program Administrators laying out in detail responsibilities and procedures for administering the plan at the organization level.
   3. Mentoring Plan to be completed by mentoring pairs in which they pick the specific activities/action items they will complete from a “menu” of possible activities divided by the substantive areas of Illinois professional responsibility CLE (professionalism, civility, ethics, diversity and inclusion, mental health and addiction).
   4. Mentoring Plan Supplement (f/k/a Resource Guide) for participating attorneys providing talking points, discussion topics, and links to relevant websites, articles, videos and other materials, in support of completing the Mentoring Plan activities.

F. Internally at the Commission, staff considered and established the technical infrastructure to support the program. The major tasks were:
   1. To assign a point person with primary responsibility for program promotion, administration and support.
   2. To update the Commission website with content explaining the Mentoring Program.
   3. To design and build applications and databases for organizations to participate and attorneys to apply for CLE credit through the Commission’s website.
   4. To design and build for each Sponsoring Organization that elected such support a “microsite” on the Commission’s website through which they could promote their program, distribute and process attorney applications and communicate with program participants.

II. PROGRAM PROMOTION AND OUTREACH 2011-Ongoing

A. Once the program materials were finalized and the technical structure was in place at the Commission, a strategy to enlist Sponsoring Organizations to implement approved mentoring programs was employed. This involved personal outreach with decision-makers at potential Sponsoring Organizations, including bar associations, law schools, law firms and other legal organizations.

B. The Commission developed and distributed promotional materials (e.g., one page information sheets, postcards with links and contact information, PowerPoint presentations). The promotional materials stressed the fact that Sponsoring Organization
could adopt the Mentoring Plan and related information posted on the Commission’s website and if so, approval would be automatic.

C. As various organizations agreed to officially become Sponsoring Organizations of a Commission-approved Lawyer-to-Lawyer Mentoring Program, their name was added to the Commission’s website.

D. Once we had commitments from Sponsoring Organizations in key geographic areas around the state, the Commission worked with the Press Secretary to the Supreme Court and others to secure press coverage and hold promotional events. Multiple events throughout state were held with Supreme Court Justices, early adopters and others announcing the launch of the initiative and bringing together existing and potential Sponsoring Organizations to celebrate and to promote the program.

E. Commissioners and Commission staff promoted (and continue to promote) the program in presentations, speeches and remarks (e.g., presentations to law firms, law schools and bar associations; reference to program by speakers at new attorney admission ceremonies, etc.)

III. PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION AND SUPPORT 2011-Ongoing

A. Program applications that are submitted through the website are reviewed and processed. If the organization seeks approval of its own program, often there are phone calls or meetings ahead of formal application to ensure the application will qualify as an approved program.

B. Respond to inquiries from individual attorneys and potential Sponsoring Organizations interested in participating in program.

C. Provide “customer support” to program participants and administrators, including trouble-shooting challenges to completion, providing assistance on program orientations, monitoring program progress, celebrating program completions and encouraging continuation.

D. Develop, post and update “FAQs” based on feedback from participants.

E. Review and process CLE applications.

F. Develop surveys for participants and obtain feedback about program specifics. (Participating attorneys are asked to complete a SurveyMonkey survey as part of the CLE application process).

G. Maintain frequent contact with Program Administrators through quarterly newsletters and annual group luncheon meetings, and continue to recruit new Sponsoring Organizations, focusing on expanding coverage into geographic areas not currently served.