

Stimulating the Local Economy Through Pro Bono

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La Liga del Barrio, Philadelphia's first Latino youth basketball league, began as one small pickup team for kids. Approached more than 16 years ago by then-City Councilman Angel L. Ortiz, and with initial financial support from the Philadelphia 76ers, Raymond Alvarez and other community leaders founded La Liga to meet a need in the Latino Community. Today, 32 teams of boys and girls, ages 6–18, race up and down the court, learning important skills like teamwork, mutual respect and healthy competition.

"We wanted to give children a structured program and to keep them off the street," says Alvarez. "We're a little family at La Liga. Once you're in, you don't leave."

After years of supplementing the league's budget with their own money, the leaders of La Liga were presented with a substantial funding opportunity. Unfortunately, they could not accept the generous offer without becoming tax exempt. "We are a small organization and we use donations for the season. We didn't have any money for attorney's fees or to incorporate into a 501(c)(3)," Alvarez said.

Enter Philadelphia VIP. As the hub of pro bono in Philadelphia, VIP promotes equal justice for all by providing civil legal services, through volunteers, to low-income Philadelphians, small businesses and nonprofit organizations. As VIP's community economic development program, LawWorks gives legal aid to small businesses to strengthen the backbone of Philly's neighborhoods, stimulate commerce, and bring business services directly to neighborhood residents. Started in 2003 as a project of the Philadelphia Bar Association's Business Law Section, LawWorks provides pro bono transactional legal assistance to small businesses and nonprofit organizations. The Section's partnership has been fundamental to LawWorks's success. In addition to significant financial support, Section members helped to create and lead the LawWorks Steering Committee, establishing the vision for the delivery of pro bono business law services in the region. The Section and the LawWorks Steering Committee taught the legal community that pro bono business law services can contribute, in a very real way, to economic development that is beneficial to the entire community.