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CDEL honors its innovative volunteers

Benefit recognized work helping vulnerable clients during pandemic

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The Center for Disability and Elder Law held its annual Light Up the Loop benefit Wednesday, honoring community members who stepped up to help those severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The virtual fundraiser and awards ceremony raised over \$180,000, which CDEL uses to provide legal aid to low-income seniors and people with disabilities across several areas, from housing and estate planning to family law and adult guardianships.

CDEL President Terri L. Ahrens, assistant general counsel for US Foods, said CDEL faced particular challenges over the last year because it serves a vulnerable population endangered by the ongoing public health and economic crises.

“CDEL, like all businesses, quickly had to pivot its way of providing services to its clients, especially since CDEL’s clients are some of the most at-risk at contracting a serious illness resulting from COVID-19 and even succumbing to its illness,” Ahrens said. “And that is because a large portion of our client base are low-income seniors and people with disabilities who are primarily people of color. CDEL’s work is necessary to



(Left to right) Attorneys Kenneth S. Shiner, Karen J. Boyd, Elizabeth “Libby” C. Wood and Catherine S. Taylor Cappel volunteer at an outdoor workshop with Center for Disability and Elder Law. The four received awards for their efforts at CDEL’s annual Light Up the Loop benefit last week. YouTube screenshot/Center for Disability and Elder Law

ensuring that these populations have their legal rights protected.”

About 380 people attended the virtual event, bidding on silent-auction prizes while a video highlighted the work of this year’s award winners.

Four individual attorneys were recognized with CDEL’s Volunteer of the Year Award. Sole practitioners Karen J. Boyd, Kenneth S. Shiner, Catherine S. Taylor Cappel and Elizabeth “Libby” C. Wood are all longtime volunteers with CDEL but earned special recognition for guiding the organization through challenging circumstances.

Chicago Bar Association President Maryam Ahmad presented the awards.

“These four volunteers have been instrumental in

ensuring the success of CDEL’s remote modifications,” Ahmad said. “Each of them exemplifies dedication and commitment to CDEL’s clients and mission.”

Boyd, Shiner, Cappel and Wood arranged outdoor document-signing workshops and remote client intake meetings and ran the pilot program of the remote guardianship helpdesk.

“It means a lot to be recognized as volunteer of the year, and it was really unexpected,” Cappel said. “But I’m really grateful, especially to have been recognized with three other attorneys who I’ve worked with for a number of years. I think that has made it all the more meaningful to me because I do think of us a kind of team.”

“CDEL adapted very well to the circumstances,” Shiner said. “The goodwill that this program builds up is just really tremendous — that people really are appreciative, and that’s what makes us feel good as volunteers.”

Chapman and Cutler LLP was recognized with the Partner of the Year Award after the firm reached out to CDEL last spring to create an automated system for estate planning documents. The new program allowed CDEL volunteer lawyers to provide estate planning and adult guardianship services completely remotely.

“When COVID hit, everything changed, and it exposed a huge need,” said Sara T. Ghadiri, pro bono counsel at Chapman and Cutler.

“The unfortunate reality is that COVID really effects seniors. Knowing that that was a vulnerable population and knowing that that’s the population that CDEL had access to made it a no-brainer for us.”

Since April, the new automated forms have assisted CDEL with serving 150 clients.

“It’s been really exciting for me to watch, since I’m just the person who put everybody together,” Ghadiri said. “It was wonderful to sit back and watch and see how it all developed. It’s been an amazing journey.”

The final award recipient

of the evening was the Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corp., which received the Impact Award, given each year to an organization that “profoundly impacts the lives of senior citizens or people with disabilities in Cook County.”

The organization works to promote economic viability and revitalization of the Auburn-Gresham community on Chicago’s South Side, providing housing stability and senior services. This year the Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corp. hosted CDEL’s first outdoor signing workshop and secured COVID-19

Rapid Relief funds for the community from the city of Chicago.

CDEL highlighted the story of Izora, an elderly woman from Auburn-Gresham who cared for 390 foster children and homeless girls in her house over the years — in addition to three daughters of her own.

Izora said she did not know what to do when she wanted to create a will. The organization put her in touch with CDEL volunteers who helped with her estate plans.

“It makes me feel good that the neighborhoods still care about seniors,” Izora

said. “Everything is in place like I wanted, and I thank them so much for that.”

Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corp. CEO Carlos Nelson said partnerships like his group’s with CDEL are “so, so critical to the evolution of our communities.”

“Coming together as a community is what CDEL is all about,” said CDEL Executive Director Caroline Manley. “As we had to adapt to our new reality over the last year, we have not only continued our work, but we have improved in so many ways thanks to the support of our partners.”