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Caterpillar Takes On Unusual Projects in New Pro Bono Program

Although in-house lawyers often wonder how to best use their skills to improve their community and the world at large, exciting and far-reaching projects can be found. The July 31, 2007 issue of *Corporate Counsel* magazine features an article about the legal assistance that a Michigan-based charity supporting the construction of schools in Malawi receives from Caterpillar Inc. As one of the client's of Caterpillar's pro bono program, The Malawi Connection has received help trademarking its name and logo and is exploring the possibility of developing a microfinancing program for Malawians.

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by James Erik Abels

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An in-house intellectual property lawyer like Michael Hurst at Caterpillar Inc. rarely has the opportunity to do pro bono work. But earlier this year, the Peoria, Ill.-based heavy equipment manufacturer decided to offer free legal services to The Malawi Connection, a Michigan-based charity. When the group needed help trademarking its name and logo, Hurst jumped at the chance to assist.

"I had never had the opportunity to do something like that," Hurst says. So far he's put in ten hours on the application, which is still pending with the Patent and Trademark Office.

The Malawi Connection is just one of several clients that Caterpillar's lawyers have taken on since the company started a formal pro bono program last November. "It was obvious to me that if the opportunities [for more pro bono work] were there, people would do it more," says deputy general counsel Michael Sposato, who is overseeing the effort. As of April, 64 volunteers had devoted more than 580 hours to providing free legal services.

One of the first beneficiaries of Caterpillar's new pro bono program, The Malawi Connection funds the construction of schools and other improvements in the African nation. Several Michigan residents started the group in 1998 after befriending Clement Chiwaya, a Malawi native who was then a college student in Grand Rapids. Likewise, Caterpillar got involved with The Malawi Connection through a personal relationship -- the charity's outside counsel is the father-in-law of an attorney at the company.

Sposato is already thinking about what Caterpillar can do next for The Malawi Connection. In particular, he wants to help the aid group set up a microfinancing system that would make small business loans to Malawians.

The project is particularly appealing to Sposato, since he's also general counsel of Caterpillar's financing subsidiary.

For its part, The Malawi Connection is grateful for the assistance. "We never expected this large of a corporation to be interested," says James Rademaker, the group's president. "You never know how you can tap into their talents, and how excited they can be about opportunities to help."

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