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Commission sends mentor model abroad

Chinese firm taking cues from state high court's civility group

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The organization tasked by the Illinois Supreme Court with instilling civility among legal professionals is spreading its message more than 6,500 miles beyond state lines.

Last month, Mark C. Palmer, professionalism counsel with the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, held a video conference with attorneys and legal scholars in Beijing, China, who were interested in learning more about the Illinois commission's lawyer-to-lawyer mentoring program.

Palmer spoke with attorneys at the Beijing Shangquan Law Firm and other legal professionals about the best practices in developing a mentoring program after the firm requested the commission's input.

The two organizations were connected through a human rights group called The Rights Practice that has locations in Beijing, London and Madison, Wis.

Palmer said a part of what led

The Rights Practice to recommend the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism to the Beijing firm was the Illinois group's emphasis on civility and professional development in its mentoring program in addition to lessons on law and compliance.

"When [The Rights Practice] dug into it, they realized that we are a little bit different than the typical substantive law mentoring/training program, that we also have the professionalism aspect to it, and that's really the foundation of our program," Palmer said. "That, I think, perked their ears a little bit more."

While Illinois' mentoring program, which was formed in 2011 after being piloted in Rockford for two years, has been used as a model by other groups across the country, this is the first time the group has shared its model overseas, Palmer said.

Palmer said the individuals he spoke with in Beijing have already been working to establish their own program, and they were seeking Palmer's advice on the particulars of structuring it.

"You need to have structure in a program, you can't just say, 'Here's two people, you go together, now start mentoring each other,'" he said.

"I emphasized the fact that you need to have structure and a plan,



Mark C. Palmer

but at the same time, the other side of the coin is that you have to have flexibility."

The Beijing group was particularly focused on criminal law, Palmer said, but he touted importance of the model being useful across all disciplines.

Illinois currently has about 80 organizations that sponsor the commission's mentoring program, which include bar associations, law schools and firms across the state.

Through the program, attorneys with five or more years of experience are paired up with attorneys who have graduated law school in the past five years.

Attorneys who participate in the yearlong mentorship program can receive six hours of profes-

sional responsibility Continuing Legal Education credits.

To date, an estimated 4,500 Illinois lawyers have participated.

Illinois' model that emphasizes professionalism is somewhat unique among attorney mentorship programs, Palmer said.

"We're not just teaching you the law or having the mentors walking attorneys through how to do a deposition ... or give tips on things. It's really much more than that. The quality is hopefully raised to a higher level, where you're involving professionalism and ethics and issues of diversity and wellness and those kinds of things. At the same time, you're learning the law and transitioning from law student into law practitioner."

Although Palmer has been busy sharing the model of Illinois' lawyer mentoring program around the country — and now, globally — he said that doesn't mean the commission is done polishing it.

He said they're continually looking at ways to improve or expand it. Currently, he said, the organization is looking at ways to hone in on diversity and inclusion issues and is considering a new element catering to more veteran attorneys going through career changes, such as shifting from a government attorney to a law firm setting.