Legal Sector

The legal sector plays a key role in enabling people’s wishes to be met at the end of life and in working in communities to raise awareness.

Why Dying Matters to the legal sector

The legal sector is very interested in working with Dying Matters to increase public awareness of legal issues which are important to those approaching the end of their lives and also to their families. It is especially important that members of the public are aware of and encouraged to make wills, consider advance decisions (formerly known as Living Wills) and, where appropriate, make Lasting Powers of Attorney relating to both financial affairs and welfare issues. All these documents have to be made when the signatory still has sufficient mental capacity to understand what they are doing. It should not be left too late. It is a shocking statistic that two thirds of the population have not made a will. The considerable interest may have been stimulated by the recent TV program “You can’t take it with you” which prompted a lot of people to think about their wills or lack of them.

It is important when a client makes a will that they use this opportunity to ensure their wishes are carried out after they have died. The will can deal not only with who is to receive their assets such as cash investments, property and chattels but also give directions as to their funerals and disposal of their bodies.

Will Aid

The Law Society has instigated a campaign called “Will Aid” for a designated month in the year. The scheme is advertised and promoted nationally and interested parties contact a participating solicitor in their locality. An appointment is made and the person concerned gives instructions for a new will and this is then completed. On signing the will, the Testator gives a donation to one of the listed charities which the solicitor sends on. The solicitor makes no charge for making the will as the fee, in practice, goes to the charity. In Cumbria this scheme recently raised £7,021.25 for charities. Some charities have made an agreement with solicitors that they will pay for a will to be made and the solicitor and client sign a certificate. This is on the basis that it is hoped the Testator will leave a legacy to charity in their will.
**Approaches and activities that would interest the legal sector**

Solicitors find it very useful to have the literature and brochures from Dying Matters. These can be displayed in the waiting rooms for the education of their clients. This literature can be given to clients before the interview and can facilitate discussion with regard to matters which might otherwise be difficult to raise or regarded as delicate. It prompts the clients to think about wider issues rather than just the simple mechanics of making a will.

Solicitors have also given talks to groups of people about to retire who are employed in health and social care, discussed their concerns at this stage of life, and advised on legal matters they needed to consider. We are also considering giving talks to nursing homes to advise families about their elderly relatives.

On the whole the Legal Sector does not provide large scale sponsorship for events, but solicitors will consider fairly nominal sums to help local projects. Some of the larger firms have more resources available.

The local law society is the best place to get information about the legal sector in your community. You will be able to get their contact details from a local solicitor. Going to speak at a meeting of your local legal society is a good way of engaging the sector in raising awareness on dying, death and bereavement and gaining their support for your activities.

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**Example**

In North Lancashire, three firms of lawyers have teamed up with the local hospice and are offering to make free wills for the hospice staff and supporters. This has been a very popular move and in the first two months from the start of the scheme, nearly 100 new wills have been made. The advantage of this is that the hospice increases its profile locally and in a positive way. The hospice and the solicitors are seen as helping the local community to put their affairs in order. The hospice can offer a will to its staff and supporters at no cost to it or the recipients – a small thank you for their support. The solicitors in turn acquire a new client and possibly some additional paid work in other areas such as Advance Decisions, LPAs or tax planning and property transfer.

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**Useful weblinks:**

www.lawcentres.org.uk

www.step.org

www.lawsociety.org.uk/clientsection