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Firms, agencies, companies aim to fill CLE needs

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About a year after state officials started accepting provider applications for continuing legal education, Illinois has accredited more than 250 organizations that offer CLE courses and seminars.

The Illinois Supreme Court's Minimum Continuing Legal Education Board has accredited more than 4,100 individual MCLE programs, said Karen Litscher Johnson, the program's director.

The total number of accredited providers — 254 as of last week — is on par with what officials expected, Johnson said. "We expect the number of accredited providers to grow, but the pace will definitely slow as the program continues."

Accredited courses have been held in some 100 Illinois cities, as well as in about 200 cities beyond state lines, according to Johnson. Moreover, Illinois lawyers have been able to collect MCLE credits on foreign soil, including in Belgium, China, Germany, India, Ireland, Japan, Lithuania and Mexico, she added.

Under MCLE rules, lawyers whose last names begin with the letters A through M must log 20 hours of CLE by June 30, 2008. That requirement increases to 24 hours in the following two years and 30 hours in each two-year period after that.

The rules provide that a minimum of four of the hours required for any two-year period must deal with such matters as professionalism, diversity, mental illness and addiction, civility or legal ethics.

Accredited providers constitute a mix of bar groups, law firms, commercial ventures and individuals. The accredited bar groups include the American, Illinois State, Chicago and DuPage County bar associations.

Some 13,000 lawyers have attended CBA CLE seminars this year, up from about 8,000 in 2006, said J. Cunyon Gordon, chair of the CBA's CLE committee. The CBA's CLE Advantage program, at \$125 per year, allows members to attend many of the organization's classes and seminars, she added.

"I don't think there have been any surprises except for how eager lawyers are to get the credits," added Gordon, who is counsel to Eimer, Stahl, Klevorn & Solberg LLP.

Accredited MCLE law firms include Bell, Boyd & Lloyd LLP; Heyl, Royster, Voelker & Allen; and Winston & Strawn LLP, all of which provide in-house courses.

"It's a huge undertaking for law firms to get into the MCLE business in Illinois," said Paula Hudson Holderman, Winston & Strawn's director of professional development.

The commercial providers include the Law Bulletin Publishing Co. (which publishes this newspaper), Lorman Education Services and the Practising Law Institute.

In March 2008, PLI will offer a two-day seminar in Chicago entitled "The Pocket MBA for Lawyers 2008: Everything You Need to Know About Finance." The cost for that program is \$1,495.

New York-based PLI has long offered courses in Illinois, said Anita C. Shapiro, the company's director of programs. The not-for-profit PLI offers more than 3,000 scholarships annually to attendees in numerous states, including Illinois, she added.

Downers Grove lawyer Mary T. Robinson sponsored a CLE program in October entitled "Keeping Your Sanity in the Practice of Law." The event ran from Oct. 26 through Oct. 28 at the Eagle Ridge Resort and Spa in Galena.

The program cost \$500, which covered four hours of CLE credit and four meals, Robinson said. Lodging and spa services were additional.

Robinson said she targeted women for the event. Eight women and two men participated.

"I misjudged," said Robinson, who earlier this year stepped down as administrator of the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission. "We had the kind of quality time I was hoping for and it didn't matter what the gender was."

Robinson, who runs an ethics and professional responsibility consulting business, said she was involved in a summer CLE program in DuPage County following the traffic death of a high-ranking prosecutor. Jane E. Radostits, deputy chief of the DuPage County state's attorney's office, died in a May 11 head-on collision and was found to have had a blood-alcohol level of 0.25 percent.

The DuPage County — "At Risk, Colleagues in Crisis" — drew about 100 lawyers, according to Robinson.

"It was a lot of pain and raw emotion that

brought people into that room," Robinson said.

"We were trying to give some people background on the physiology of addiction," Robinson added, "but also what it's like to be in the middle of addiction or depression."

The program was reprised earlier this month at the ISBA's and Illinois Judges Association's mid-year meeting.

Another accredited MCLE provider is the ARDC. Under the Supreme Court's mandate, the agency has long been responsible for helping educate lawyers about ethics and professional responsibility, said James J. Grogan, the ARDC's deputy administrator.

"But things have really gotten far more busy here since the adoption of the MCLE rules," Grogan added.

Grogan said he participated in 45 CLE presentations this year, while 21 different ARDC lawyers participated in more than 140 speeches and CLE events in 2007.

Some of those events filled up quickly, Grogan said. So, some lawyers who were precluded from attending those events suggested Webcasting. The ARDC is looking into providing that service to lawyers, he added.

The ARDC does not charge for CLE offerings, Grogan said. "We never charge providers because we want people to get the optimum professional responsibility training."

As for law firms, Winston & Strawn put on 129 CLE programs this year, covering a variety of topics, such as strategies for summary judgment, attorney-client privilege and federal appeals, Holderman said.

Winston & Strawn also conducts a three-day trial practice program.

The CBA and other accredited providers are expected to increase the number of CLE offerings as the June reporting deadline approaches.

The CBA typically offers 15 to 20 CLE programs a month, not including association committee meetings, which also can count for CLE credit, Gordon said. In May and June, the CBA may offer as many as 30 CLE programs monthly, she added.

The MCLE board's Johnson offered advice to lawyers to beat the deadline.

"Don't wait. Take courses that meet your needs," Johnson added. "It will become more difficult to get the courses that meet your needs" as the deadline approaches.