



# The Art of Advice

**David Wm. Engelman on what he's learned after 40 years of law and a lifetime of helping the less fortunate** BY ANDREW BRANDT

Bankruptcy attorney David Wm. Engelman has represented businesses and lenders for decades, but he might be better known for his free financial clinics for the needy. "The knowledge of the law is essentially the same, but it's very different folks that you're working with as clients," he says.

A practicing attorney for 40 years, Engelman has been serving the less fortunate for longer still. "My family was always involved in charitable activities—providing assistance in elderly care homes, working with multiple sclerosis groups," he says. "All my life, I've done things to try to make situations better for people less privileged than me."


Now a shareholder at Engelman Berger in Phoenix, Engelman puts on clinics with the Maricopa County Volunteer Lawyers Program in connection with the county bar association. In addition to offering free financial advice to indigent pro bono clients, Engelman uses the program to advise young lawyers on the best ways to provide free legal services.

Listening skills are paramount. Clients often don't have crucial financial documents and paperwork. "In these clinics," Engelman says, "it's very important to go in, listen and be able to extract the information necessary in order to formulate the advice that the client needs. It's an art."

Years ago, a mother and her five children came into a clinic for help. They were on the verge of eviction. "Her sole source of income was through her employment with a hotel as a laundry assistant," says Engelman. "She had an annual salary of maybe \$25,000. Her wages were being garnished to satisfy a large debt to a payday loan company. Because of the garnishment, she was not able to pay her rent. Our team of volunteers reached out to the garnishing creditor to stop the garnishment, but to no avail. We then quickly filed a bankruptcy for her, which stopped the garnishment. While doing that, we negotiated a payment arrangement with her landlord that involved a reduction of rent.

"I remember that because six months later, [she] came back to the clinic with a few of her children to thank us for our work and to show us how she was getting along," Engelman adds.

The Volunteer Lawyers Program clinics are currently held once or twice monthly in Phoenix. Clients begin the process with a financial interview over the phone, to see if they qualify; from there, they go through a short screening to determine their specific financial issue; then they schedule an appointment to meet with one of the roughly 30 volunteer attorneys who participate in the program. Engelman is always looking to expand the group of attorneys he can count on for volunteer assistance, and he hopes to extend the program's coverage throughout Maricopa County.

Engelman is happy that the clinics are just one of a number of similar-minded programs in the area: "We're not alone. Fortunately, there are a lot of good folks doing some good pro bono work in town. 



**David Wm. Engelman**  
BANKRUPTCY

## Engelman's Tips for Getting Involved

"First of all, find a mentor," Engelman says.

"Second, find the type of pro bono work that you enjoy. If somebody does some pro bono work that they're not familiar with—[or] not comfortable doing—they won't enjoy it, and they won't stay with it. So find something that you're competent in and enjoy.

"Three: Let the experience of getting the satisfaction of helping somebody kind of sift into you. You will be, I think, hooked."

Furthermore: "Try to develop a sense of empathy. And, at the same time, create a sense of personal responsibility in your clients."