

## EXECUTIVE PROFILE

# Bob Sable

# Legal appeal

## GBLS chief fights funding woes as demand for services rises

BY LISA VAN DER POOL  
JOURNAL STAFF

**B**ob Sable is used to dealing with crises on a daily basis. As the executive director of **Greater Boston Legal Services**, a nonprofit that provides free legal services to the state's poor and disabled population, it is Sable's job to oversee his team of 70 lawyers in their efforts to prevent evictions, domestic violence and foreclosures, among a host of other issues.

But lately Sable has been spending much of his time thinking about the crisis that has hit his own organization.

During the past several months, GBLS has lost a whopping \$2 million in annualized funding that it gets from the Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA). The funding, a concept that began in the United States during the 1980s, comes from the interest accrued on money that lawyers hold for their clients in trust accounts, often from business deals or down payments on homes. Those funds have plummeted during the past several months, because IOLTA is linked to the federal target interest rate.

Funding from IOLTA has become the organization's largest single source of revenue during the past few years. Last year, the organization's annual budget was about \$14.5 million. Now it's about \$12 million.

"This is a huge fiscal crisis," Sable said. "Unfortunately, it couldn't have happened at a worse time in terms of demand for our services."

Sable is now working to plug that funding gap. If he doesn't, he'll be forced to lay off staff.

Since 1991, Sable has been executive director of GBLS. During his tenure, the organization



### FROM THE FILE

**Position:** Executive director

**Education:** Bachelor's in government, Harvard College, 1963; law degree, Yale Law School, 1968

**Age:** 66

**Quote:** "We're trying to have the business community understand that this is an important part of the social structure of our community. A lot of business people say, 'Why do poor people need a lawyer?' But I think once they spend some time with us and see the difference we make in peoples lives, it really does make a difference."

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# SABLE: A career giving legal help to people who need it the most

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has had several large victories, including the \$310 million settlement against the **Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority** in 2006 to improve public access to the T and an \$850,000 settlement of the federal class action lawsuit against Michael Bianco Inc., the former New Bedford factory that was the setting for the controversial March 2007 immigration raid. The class action suit was on behalf of 764 employees of the factory to receive unpaid wages and overtime payments.

"We've been having, we think, a huge impact in that area," Sable said.

GBLS has a staff of about 130 staff and lawyers, and at any given time has about 15,000 open matters. Still, because of budget constraints, the non-profit turns away about half the people who seek help.

"It's going to be a very difficult couple of years, but I'm very confident that, under Bob, GBLS is going to continue to provide the best possible legal services to the poor," said **Julia Huston**, a partner at **Bromberg & Sunstein** in Boston and a member of GBLS' board.

Despite the fact that legal services is not a terribly lucrative or easy career path, Sable, 66, has spent his entire

career serving the poor. Although he's had job offers from big law firms, Sable realized long ago that he was a "lifer" in the business.

Growing up in Syracuse, N.Y., Sable was inspired at a young age by his father, who served in the peacetime Army and then volunteered and served in World War II.

After attending **Harvard College**, Sable served in the **Peace Corps**, in Liberia, West Africa from 1963 to 1965. Sable decided on law school because of a vague desire to go into politics or government, but he soon realized he had made the right move once he got to **Yale Law School**.

"I got really inspired by the idea that the law had a real role to play in abolishing poverty and that legal services was a place where you could take those tools and use them."

Sable volunteered during law school and, after graduating, went to work for the **Legal Aid Society of Cleveland**, where he stayed until 1974. After that he took a job at the **National Consumer Law Center** where he eventually became executive director.

But Sable longed for a more urban setting and, when the job of executive director opened at GBLS, he jumped at the chance.

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In 1996, Sable made the difficult decision to forgo all federal funding after Congress put restrictions on the type of legal work that could be done at organizations that accepted funding, including work with illegal aliens. If Sable had not made that choice, GBLS would not have been able to provide legal help to the workers in the Michael Bianco raid.

The restricted work "was the kind of work that went to the heart of our mission," said Sable, who had to reduce the size of the staff as a consequence of the decision to eschew federal money.

"He is an exceedingly dedicated, committed and serious leader and he has lead the organization through some

challenging times," said **Richard A. Marks**, executive vice president at **WS Development** in Chestnut Hill, who has been on the GBLS board since 1989.

Now, Sable is working furiously to raise an extra \$2 million. He's trimmed expenses by renegotiating the non-profit's health care plan and also by asking his staff to take one unpaid day a month, likely starting in February, which will save the organization about \$600,000 over the course of two years.

Depending on how well GBLS does in raising an extra \$2 million, Sable may have to cut between 10 to 15 staffers by this summer. Sable is hoping to avoid the cuts by increasing donations from the legal and business communities.

"The legal community has traditionally supported us and stepped up to the plate," Sable said. "But more and more we're trying to have the business community understand that this is an important part of the social structure of our community. A lot of business people say, 'Why do poor people need a lawyer' but I think once they spend some time with us and see the difference we make in peoples lives, it really does make a difference."

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