

Hands Across CUNY HR

A Dedicated Sick Leave Success Story



The City University of New York implemented a dedicated sick leave program for employees in 2010, but until recently, the CUNY School of Law had never needed to use it. Then an employee fell very ill, and eventually exhausted all his accrued leave. When that happened, HR director Elizabeth Johnston and her deputy, Sondra Brereton, reached out quietly and confidentially to employees at the Law School who had indicated that they would be willing to help their colleague out by donating annual and sick leave.

“We were able to carry him approximately four and a half months, but he needed another six weeks or so,” said Liz. “He got within a week of having to come off payroll, and he was the sole breadwinner, his wife wasn’t working and they couldn’t afford COBRA.”



Mickie Driscoll of Kingsborough, left, and Elizabeth Johnston of CUNY Law School

So Liz and Sondra reached out to some of their CUNY HR colleagues across the University. Within a day, Kingsborough Community College’s director of human resources, Mickie Driscoll, responded to their call: Kingsborough staff donated 22 sick days and 10 vacation days to the Law School employee, translating into the remaining leave for which he was eligible. Said Mickie, “This happened not too long after Hurricane Sandy. We had employees of our own needing assistance, and we were all in donating mode. So we reached out to some employees who were at their sick day cap and had already donated to KCC staff. When I asked, they were glad to help someone in need, it didn’t matter where they worked. I didn’t have to twist anyone’s arm.”

CUNY HR’s efforts to help colleagues in need will soon be augmented by another “insurance” vehicle for employees, as the new Catastrophic Sick Leave Bank is implemented. The DSL program allows employees to donate leave to another staff member. In CSLB, employees “deposit” annual or sick leave into a “bank,” so that if they themselves suffer a catastrophic illness or injury and exhaust their leave, they are eligible to request a “withdrawal” on their own behalf. Les Williams, Executive Director of University Shared Services, says that in some ways it reminds him of the charitable CUNY Campaign, in which CUNY employees can donate to CUNY programs if they wish. “You’re able to help others and you might possibly benefit from it yourself,” said Williams.

Vice Chancellor Ginger Waters praised the successful collaboration between the Law School and Kingsborough, and emphasized how important it is that DSL be handled by campus human resources offices: “These are extremely sensitive matters that *must* be handled confidentially. Employees at the campuses should be advised not to communicate an employee’s illness or financial need to colleagues—even with the best of intentions—but to leave requests for assistance in the hands of experienced CUNY HR professionals like Liz Johnston and Mickie Driscoll.”