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legal aid society of cleveland presses on despite budget cuts

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The [Legal Aid Society of Cleveland](#) has become a leaner operation in the last year, but that hasn't stopped the nonprofit organization from continuing to assist low-income Northeast Ohioans in need of council.

Cuts in federal funding forced Legal Aid to lay off eight staff members in 2012. It could have been worse, says director of development and communications Melanie Shakarian, but private donations allowed the nonprofit to keep most of its staff intact.

Legal Aid now has 50 lawyers on hand to give free help to the poor on cases involving evictions, divorce, loss of benefits and other civil issues. The organization still has the capacity to help 25,000 people annually, although the reduction in funding will force Legal Aid to turn away some potential clients.

"We're striving to help as many people as possible, but we're always going to need more assistance," Shakarian says.

The century-old agency receives most of its funding through a federal grant, civil filing fees and interest on money that attorneys set aside in trusts for their clients' legal settlements. With the cuts, Legal Aid must make the difficult determination of what cases are the most desperate.

"We take on pro bono volunteers to take the cases we cannot," says Shakarian.

Legal Aid is fortunate to have nonprofit partners that add value to its legal services, notes the agency director. For example, the organization has three attorneys on site at [MetroHealth Medical Center](#) to resolve the legal issues that can become barriers for patients.

Shakarian believes that with additional help, these good works can continue into 2013 and beyond. "The community really stepped up last year," she says. "We're confident that generosity will continue."

SOURCE: Melanie Shakarian

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