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Building a quality **WORKFORCE**
 through DIVERSITY

FROM LEFT: Randell McShepard, Tom Sullivan Jr.,
 Janeen Kastner, Ernest Thomas and Frank C. Sullivan

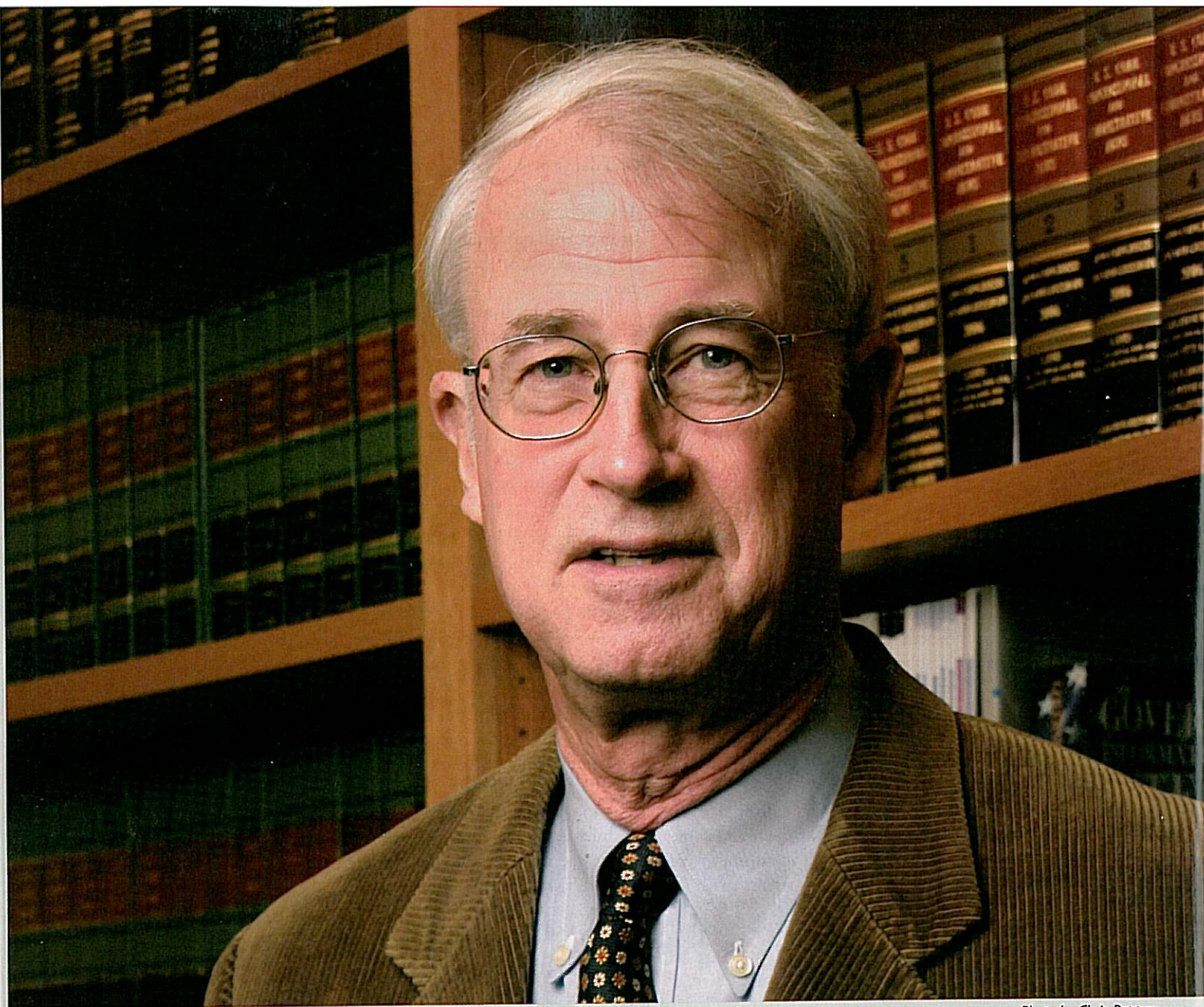


Photo by Chris Pappas

David Dawson, deputy director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, says the society is working to aid those affected by the mortgage foreclosure crisis.

Affordable justice

Legal Aid Society reaches out to low-income people

BY MARY AICHLMAYR

Last year, about 55,000 people in Greater Cleveland needed legal assistance but were unable to afford it, according to the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

National statistics show that 80 percent of the legal needs of low-income people go unmet. The problem has worsened in recent years with the increase in foreclosures associated with predatory lending and the rise in workplace discrimination and exploitation — two issues that affect low-income people.

According to Colleen M. Cotter, executive director of the

Legal Aid Society, there has been a fivefold increase in the yearly foreclosure filings in Cuyahoga County in the last 10 years.

"In 2005, there were 12,000 foreclosures on people's homes in Cleveland," she told the First Friday Club of Cleveland recently. Because of the exorbitant interest rates charged to borrowers by predatory lenders, "people can't pay their usurious debts and therefore lose their homes," Cotter said.

"The foreclosure crisis can be attributed to free market capitalism run amuck," adds David Dawson, deputy director of the Legal Aid Society.

The Legal Aid Society is doing everything it can to bring hope to the low-income community of Cleveland. A private, non-profit organization, Legal Aid Society is funded by the Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation and the federal Legal Services Corp. Additional funding is provided by United Way agencies in Northeast Ohio, the Western Reserve Area Office on Aging, several county agencies, foundations and private donations from area law firms and lawyers. And more than 700 attorneys from large and small law firms volunteer their services to supplement the full-time work of Legal Aid Society's 45 staff attorneys.

The organization is a valuable resource for people who can't afford traditional legal services. Single people with annual incomes below \$13,000, for example, or families of four with annual incomes below \$26,000 are eligible for legal assistance from the Legal Aid Society, according to Dawson.

"Legal Aid has been fighting predatory lending practices for more than 100 years and has been working on the current predatory lending problem, as seen in the foreclosure crisis, for 10 years," says Dawson.

In addition to supporting clients in the courts, the Legal Aid Society tackles social issues at the political level to help prevent litigation in the first place. "We have worked with the City of Cleveland to pass anti-predatory lending legislation, which was attacked and defeated in the Ohio Supreme Court by the lenders and banks," says Dawson. "We work with the Cuyahoga County Foreclosure Prevention program in their efforts to save homes from foreclosure."

Another problem being faced by the low-income community is exploitation in the workplace. "Most low-income people work," said Cotter, "but for terrible wages and in unsafe working conditions. They are exploited and powerless."

In September, the Legal Aid Society introduced a pilot program called the Cleveland Wage Project, which focuses on improving employment opportunities, working conditions and wages for Cleveland's immigrant and Latino communities. Two attorneys are dedicated to the program, which will continue through June 2010. Funding for the project comes from a one-year, \$25,000 grant from the Thomas H. White Foundation and a three-year, \$380,000 grant from the Ohio

Legal Assistance Foundation.

Dawson says Legal Aid can help low-wage workers recover wages for violations of the minimum-wage law and overtime. "Low-wage workers also encounter discrimination based on race, sex, age and disability," he says. "Likewise, they are often not provided their rights under the Family Medical Leave Act.

"The ongoing transition from welfare to work has left many people exposed to poverty in a weak regional economy that, sadly, boasts one of the poorest cities in the country at its core," says Dawson.

"Add to that the plight of children who emerge from a school system unprepared for the current-day economy and the racial injustice of a criminal justice system that warehouses African American males and releases them with little prospect for self-sufficiency," he states.

"Legal Aid attorneys represent parents and children who are denied appropriate education services," Dawson continues. "Many students who are involved in disciplinary problems are in need of special education and behavioral services," he explains. "By receiving these services, it is more likely that they will receive the education that they need to enter the work force and avoid entry to the juvenile system and the school-to-prison pipeline."

Legal Aid Society staff members also


speak to organizations about the legal rights of low-income people and distribute educational materials about bankruptcy, domestic violence, expungement, identity theft, special education, earned income tax credit and debt collector harassment.

Still, much work has to be done. While the Legal Aid Society serves approximately 8,000 clients per year, sadly, more than 10,000 must be turned away because of the organization's limited resources.

"With more resources, such as pro bono attorneys, we can provide assistance to those disputes that have not yet developed into litigation," Dawson says.

"We constantly try to raise more money for innovative programs to address specific legal needs, such as our wage, re-entry and immigrant detention projects," he says. "We anticipate hiring more attorneys and paralegals as a result of increased funding. We also look at new technological innovations that will increase access to justice for low-income people."

"Access to justice builds strong communities," said Cotter, "by righting wrongs, ensuring that having power and money does not load the dice in your favor and ensuring that all people and all communities have access to our justice system and to the power of the law.

"And, justice builds strong communities by empowering low-income people to know that, just as you and I, they, too, can redress their just grievances." 

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Executive director
Legal Aid Society of Cleveland