

The News Herald (news-herald.com), Serving Northern Ohio

News

Aid headed to free legal service

Thursday, February 19, 2009 1:33 AM EST

By Nick Carrabine

NCarrabine@News-Herald.com

With an increase in clientele combined with scarce funding, the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has experienced difficulties just like many other charitable organizations in these tough economic times.

Legal Aid, which serves clients in five counties including Lake and Geauga, provides free legal services to low-income residents who cannot afford an attorney.

"The economy is affecting us incredibly," said Melanie Shakarian, attorney and director of development at Legal Aid. "We've seen an increase of individuals who have had issues with employment, foreclosures, evictions, health and education.

"All across the board, the legal needs of low-income people never cease."

Today, Legal Aid will receive money from Dworken & Bernstein Co., L.P.A. in an attempt to help the organization service some of its clients.

The donation is part of Dworken & Bernstein's Ohio Lawyers Give Back, which was founded by the Painesville law firm in April 2007.

Ohio Lawyers Give Back promotes the use of cy pres in class action settlements.

When a class action lawsuit is settled, the plaintiff and the defendant agree to an amount to pay all class members. However, because many class members have moved, died or can't be found, millions of settlement dollars go unclaimed, said Patrick Perotti of the law firm.

Cy pres, meaning "as nearly as possible," allows a court to direct unclaimed funds to charities or organizations instead of returning those funds to the wrong-doing defendant, Perotti said.

Within the last few years, more than \$18 million was distributed to dozens of charities by Dworken & Bernstein.

How much money Legal Aid will receive today is a surprise, but Shakarian said it will go directly to servicing its clients.

"The low-income people will benefit from this," she said. "The legal system is so complicated nowadays. It's hard for people to represent themselves. You need a lawyer on your side when fighting issues.

"This donation will help supplement our revenue," she added. "It helps us do more creative work. This is money we don't budget for, so this money comes above and beyond what our normal budget is."

Perotti said the law firm chose Legal Aid because it will benefit clients who are often times cheated.

"The people who get cheated the most often in society are the ones who are least able to defend themselves," he said. "It's the poor, the elderly or the uneducated.

"Those are the people who most need legal advice because they are the easiest to scam and can least afford to have someone help them. They are double vulnerable," he added.

Howard Rabb, also an attorney with Dworken & Bernstein, encourages more law firms to follow in its footsteps.

"We are very proud we are at the forefront of this concept," he said. "It's resulting in lots of money in the pocket of wonderful organizations when they most need it."

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