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News

Free Legal Aid clinics help parents deal with child support problems

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August is Child Support Awareness Month, and the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland is celebrating by hosting a series of free legal advice sessions to help people who both pay and receive child support.

"Receiving child support helps children feel secure, builds confidence and trust, and helps our kids pursue their dreams," said Melanie Shakarian, Legal Aid's director of development. "But with so many child support obligors (those obligated to pay) either losing their jobs or having a reduction in income, the courts locally are seeing an increase in questions and an increase in requests for child support modification.

"In many cases, the court has no choice but to reduce the child support obligation. This often leaves a custodial parent in dire financial straits. The court, however, must balance the needs of both parents against this reality."

Legal Aid and local child support agencies are hoping the clinics can help parents on both ends of the spectrum better understand their child support rights and responsibilities.

Although some "deadbeat" parents deliberately shirk their responsibilities, others have trouble making their payments through no fault of their own, said Davida Dodson, managing attorney for the Legal Aid Society's eastern offices.

"The tough economy today sometimes changes the financial circumstances of obligors in child support matters," Dodson said. "Also, some people can become physically disabled and they can't work. That individual may desire help filing a motion to modify his or her child support obligations. They can become very behind on support and lose their driver's license unless they get the order changed.

"Likewise, with the tough economic times, obligees (those who receive child support) may not be receiving their support and may need assistance with enforcement. It's really tough for everyone these days. I think the court is sensitive at looking at both sides."

Lake County Domestic Relations Judge Colleen Falkowski said the advice sessions are a great way to reach more people struggling with child support issues.

"Anything that Legal Aid puts on to help folks through the legal system is a wonderful thing," the judge added. "There are a lot of people who cannot afford to hire an attorney."

The first clinic was held Tuesday at the Veterans Service Commission in Cleveland to help veterans with child support

questions.

The next session will be held at Lake County Job & Family Services, 177 Main St. in Painesville, from 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday.

A final clinic will take place at Legal Aid's Cleveland office from 2 to 4 p.m. Aug. 23.

Attendees are asked to bring important papers with them to the clinics. Attorneys are available for brief advice and referral only. Appointments are preferred. For more information, call 888-817-3777 or visit www.lasclev.org.

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