



Sen. Rob Portman salutes Legal Aid Society of Cleveland on 108 years of helping the needy

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U.S. Sen. Rob Portman, who was in Northeast Ohio last week to tour Graftech International's new production facility in Medina County, was the keynote speaker at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's annual fundraising luncheon on Tuesday. He congratulated Legal Aid for helping 24,000 adults and children avoid being evicted, get extra help in school, find gainful employment and create new lives for themselves, and urged other attorneys to get involved in its efforts to provide "Equal justice under the law" regardless of circumstance or ability to pay. *(celebrated the Sharon Center's grand opening. (John Kuntz, The Plain Dealer)*

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- **U.S. Sen. Rob Portman** joined more than 800 members of the Greater Cleveland legal community on Tuesday to salute the **Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's** efforts to pursue justice for the poor, needy and vulnerable.

Legal Aid last year handled 9,478 cases on behalf of nearly 24,000 adults and children. But dwindling resources also forced the Legal Aid staff to turn away 50 percent of the people who asked for help in 2012.

Despite being the fifth oldest and among the largest of 134 independent legal aid associations nationwide, the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has had to cut back on the number of people it can help: from 10,279 cases in 2011 to 9,478 (801 fewer) in 2012. Two staff lawyers were let go and Legal Aid has not replaced another two who retired.

Portman said those 9,000 cases are more than statistics, because they represent Legal Aid "giving those families the ability to be contributing members of society."

He mentioned a woman who endured 18 years of abuse from her husband before Legal Aid helped her get a divorce, full custody of her children and a new start in life. Legal Aid also helped a Gulf War veteran keep a roof over his head, find a job and get his life back on track.

Portman was introduced at Tuesday's luncheon by former U.S. Congressman and retired Legal Aid board member Louis Stokes, who said Portman strongly supports Legal Aid's work to ensure shelter, safety and economic security for those most in need, not only in Cleveland but nationwide.

Noting that Portland has developed a reputation for expertly impersonating Democratic opponents for Republican presidential candidates, Stokes joked that "Today we have the real Rob Portman, not pretending to be anybody but himself."

Founded 108 years ago:

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, founded 108 years ago where the Huntington Building now stands, serves clients from Ashtabula to Lorain counties.

"In 1905, Cleveland was an industrial boomtown," said **Ann Bergen**, president of Legal Aid's board of directors. "Waves of immigrants were doubling Cleveland's population every 20 years. Those immigrants, whether from overseas, the South or out West, faced a harsh new world in the city.

"Legal Aid's clients' most frequent worries were (wage) garnishment, debt, rent problems and desertion. A century later, debt and housing still lead the list. Instead of loan sharks, we have payday lenders," she said.

Colleen M. Cotter, executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, said: "Securing 'equal justice under law' -- the words engraved across the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington -- is what we are about and why we are all gathered here today."

"Being poor means far more than legal problems in your life than most of us in this room will ever face," she said. "Being poor means a lifetime of unavoidable debts, substandard housing, foreclosures, trouble accessing credit, uncaring bureaucracies -- to say nothing of unscrupulous landlords, payday lenders and the hordes of others who prey on the powerless.

"We at Legal Aid work to make sure that the powerless get a fair shake, that justice is not just pretty paintings and noble courthouses with marble columns, but something real for everyone, rich and poor," Cotter added.

With a staff of 70, including 45 attorneys, Legal Aid works with more than 1,600 volunteer lawyers and more than 200 law students to represent residents who couldn't otherwise afford attorneys or legal advice.

Of those whom Legal Aid was able to help in 2012, it prevented 95 percent of them from being evicted from their homes; removed barriers to education for 87 percent; secured health insurance for 96 percent; saved 70 percent of their homes from foreclosures; and increased safety for 98 percent of them.

"And we increased our clients' assets, increased their income and reduced their debt by a combined \$27 million," Cotter said.

Tough but satisfying work:

As a young lawyer, Portman volunteered for a program run by the **Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati**, and called his time there tough but satisfying. He still recommends that lawyers contribute their time to Legal Aid because of what they will learn from the experience.

He called the spirit of volunteerism uniquely American, noting "in other countries, there are very few lawyers who volunteer their time" to help low-income clients. "That is the strength of our country."

"If you are helping people in poverty, you tend to see the connections to mental health issues, homelessness, human trafficking and substance abuse," he added.

"For people coming out of prison, instead of giving them a clean shirt, \$5 bucks and a bus ticket, let's give them some help," instead of abandoning them and contributing to the high numbers who find themselves back in the system within three years.

"I know it's easy to beat up on lawyers, and as a recovering one myself," Portman joked that he's had to give up telling lawyer jokes, "because lawyers don't think they're funny, and non-lawyers don't think they're jokes."

"In the last three weeks, I've been to 25 counties," he said. "I've talked to people at every business level and every walk of life, and we haven't turned the corner."

And as long as 370,000 people in Northeast Ohio live in poverty and qualify for Legal Aid services, "there'll always be a pressing need for what you do," he said, to applause. The event raised more than \$150,000 for Legal Aid.

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