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7:02 PM, Sep 3, 2013

CLEVELAND -- The poor have the same legal rights and deserve the same kind of treatment under the law and representation in court that their better-off fellow citizens enjoy.

That's the underlying principle of the Legal Aid Society and the message stressed at the group's annual luncheon at the Renaissance Hotel.

Senator Rob Portman was the keynote speaker and applauded the group's work while saying, "the best help is a growing economy that provides more jobs and opportunities" to get people in a better position to help themselves.

The group represents clients in need in Lorain, Cuyahoga, Lake, Geauga and Ashtabula counties.

Last year it helped more than 24,000 clients involve in 9,678 cases.

The group is 108 years old. It's the 5th oldest of the 134 Legal Aid Societies in the nation.

Clients need help fighting foreclosure, navigating through debts, dealing with substandard housing and unscrupulous landlords and getting protection from payday lenders.

There are 70 lawyers and support staff and 1,600 lawyers also volunteer their time.

Last year, Legal Aid saved clients more than \$27 million by collecting rightful benefits or reducing debts.

One disheartening figure – 50 percent of those seeking help must be turned away for lack of resources.