



Lawyers help divorce clients file legal papers themselves

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Star Beacon

October 29, 2009 11:17 pm

— JEFFERSON — Three divorces were filed in Ashtabula County Common Pleas Court late Wednesday afternoon, not an unusual event itself, except these cases were the result of a pro se — or do-it-yourself — divorce clinic.

Davida Dodson, managing attorney for the Lake and Ashtabula counties Legal Aid offices, said the clinic was a Pro Bono Celebration Week project. The American Bar Association encouraged local associations to develop and implement projects for the week, Oct. 25-31. Dodson worked with Ashtabula County lawyers Ann Bergen and Anne Reese to develop the forms and hold the clinic at the Jefferson Legal Aid office. Eight persons signed up for the clinic, but only three showed up. Dodson said they went to work shortly after 1:30 p.m. and wrapped things up in time to file before the Clerk of Courts Office closed.

“The court clerks were really nice; it was a really nice experience,” Dodson said.

The cases are simple uncontested actions in which there are no debts, no children and no assets to deal with, not the kind of divorce cases Legal Aid usually gets involved with. Dodson said they wanted to develop forms and instructions that would help an individual file the action and represent himself or herself in court with some initial instruction from the lawyers, who donated their time to the project.

The forms had to pass muster with the judges of the court before the lawyers could put them to use in the clinic. The lawyers helped the pro bono clients with the paperwork and gave them a list of questions they can expect the judge to ask them when the hearing is held. Since they will be representing themselves, it’s likely they will be nervous; having the answers written down ahead of time will prepare them better for the appearance.

The lawyers also helped the three people prepare judgment entries they can file after the judge grants the divorce.

“For many of them, it would be a financial benefit, but for more of them, it is an opportunity to move on with their lives,” Dodson said.

The project was a one-time event, although the same clinic is being held in Lake County today (only Lake County residents are eligible). She said the pro se forms they used first would have to be approved by the local bar associations before they could be made available online.

“It might occur at some point,” she said. “This was a pilot, a one-time project, that we hope to do again.”

Pro Bono Week recognizes the work lawyers do without compensation. Dodson said she’s very proud of the volunteering record of the county’s lawyers; she estimates that about 30 percent of them do some type of pro bono work.

Typical cases include foreclosure mediation, eviction defense, tax cases, wills, domestic violence and divorce. The work is done one on one, usually at the Legal Aid office. Pro bono work also can take the form of public meetings. The Ashtabula law firm of Andrews and Pontius holds brief advice clinics twice a year to provide people with access to an attorney free of charge.

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has five attorneys who represent clients in the two offices, Jefferson and Painesville. The services are provided to income-eligible clients in consumer, family, housing and health, education, work income and immigration law.

Melanie A. Shakarian, director of development for the society, said demand for both Legal Aid services and pro bono legal assistance continues to grow. There has been a 35 percent increase in the Legal Aid caseload this year, yet more than half of eligible people seeking assistance had to be turned away.

“Without the pro bono efforts of the legal community in our five-county service area, the work of the Legal

Aid Society of Cleveland could not be accomplished,” she stated in an e-mail. “The private bar in Ashtabula County, especially, has been an impressive support.”
online: County Bar Association, ashtabulacountybar.com; Legal Aid, lasclev.org; Pro Bono Celebration, celebrateprobono.org

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