



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Legal Aid advice helps pave way for some in jobs program

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Plain Dealer Reporter

Single mother Quiana Singleton loved her landscaping job, until her paychecks bounced.

She was an "employee of the month" at her next job, until the speedometer manufacturer laid her off.

That was in August.

Since then, the transmission broke in her beater car and she hasn't landed another job. Still, she smiles easily.

"My daughter has to have more than me," she said. "She keeps me going. I want her life to be better, easier than mine."

Weekdays, Singleton takes 4-year-old Quiasja to a day-care center near the Vocational Guidance Services training center on East 55th Street. There, she polishes and mails her résumé, surfs the Internet and studies help-wanted ads, alongside ex-convicts and others relying on public assistance but seeking a better life.

She has already graduated from the nonprofit group's three-week training program, which includes writing a résumé, dressing for interviews, finding reliable child care, getting a reliable alarm clock and more.

Participants are paid \$5.15 an hour the second and third weeks, then they are placed in temporary jobs for two to six months, to establish a work history for their résumés.

And every Friday this year, they could meet with an attorney.

Anne Sweeney, a lawyer with the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, is helping Singleton get the pay the landscaper owes her, clear the damage done to her credit history and apply for unemployment benefits.

Sweeney battles slum landlords and evictions. She seeks work-related driving privileges for those with suspended licenses.

She also helps battered women get court orders barring their abusers from contacting them, spurs public-housing officials to relocate women fleeing their abusers, and helps them get divorced.

"I'm amazed at how much stress the unemployed and working poor manage," Sweeney said. Her goal is to lessen "their juggling act."

For ex-con Lydia Sandifer, 44, that means getting a divorce from her husband and child support from a boyfriend, the father of her ill toddler. But nothing can be done about her felony drug conviction.

Sandifer spent 11 months in prison five years ago and says she has been sober ever since. Sweeney can help get a misdemeanor conviction expunged, but not a felony.

Sandifer served more than six years in the Army and worked for nine as a nursing assistant before crack cocaine took over. She hasn't worked for the last four years.

"Employers haven't taken a chance on me, but I'm staying upbeat," she said, and pointed toward Sweeney, huddled with another client.

"With a little help, I smile and keep going."

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland assists low-income residents of Cuyahoga, Lorain, Lake, Geauga and Ashtabula counties. Call 216-687-1900 or visit [www.lasclev.org](http://www.lasclev.org). Employers wanting to mentor Vocational Guidance Services participants can call 216-881-6021. The training program is available across Northeast Ohio to recipients of food stamps or welfare who are within weeks of losing that public assistance. Call 216-431-7800 or visit [www.vgsjob.org](http://www.vgsjob.org). Both organizations are funded by government and private grants, endowments and donations.

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