

LEGAL AFFAIRS

Legal Aid Society eyes partnerships, strategic plan

Cleveland office offers legal services to shelter in Lorain County, plans to hire seven attorneys

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The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland will begin providing legal services by September to those seeking refuge at the Genesis House, a domestic violence shelter in Lorain County.

It's the kind of partnership that Legal Aid executive director Colleen M. Cotter believes will shape the future of the group, which provides free legal services to the needy.

"We're going to look at growth and strategic growth that makes the most sense for the community we serve," said Patricia A. Poole, an attorney at the Cleveland office of Baker & Hostetler LLP and recently installed president of Legal Aid's board of trustees.

The pilot program with Genesis House, the exact location of which is kept secret, is an example of the ongoing growth at Legal Aid. The

organization this month also plans to hire seven attorneys, and this fall will begin a \$200,000 renovation to its West Sixth Street office building to make room for the hires.

Legal Aid also is in the midst of meetings over its strategic plan.

While partnering with community groups such as the Genesis House sounds like a natural activity for Legal Aid, Ms. Cotter said the group, aside from a four-year-old relationship with MetroHealth Medical Center, hasn't been able to do this sort of thing before because resources had been tight.

But with a strong budget this year of about \$7 million, those resources are now available, and Legal Aid is looking to take advantage by expanding both in terms of size and offerings.

As it relates to MetroHealth, one of the group's attorneys in mid-August will begin working at MetroHealth offices on Broadway Avenue

and Buckeye Road. Legal Aid already has had an attorney working at the main MetroHealth campus in Cleveland for the past four years, Ms. Cotter said.

The attorneys are there to help hospital staff understand the many legal issues patients face, such as identifying a child's learning disorders and then working with a school to provide services fitting the child's need.

"It sort of makes sense to treat people holistically," Ms. Cotter said.

Genesis House executive director Marilyn Zeidner is happy to have the help.

"We're not attorneys and sometimes that's what they need," Ms. Zeidner said.

Ms. Cotter said the group might also be interested in partnering with social workers, who work with people most likely to be Legal Aid clients.

It's not just the operational strategy that is being revisited by Legal Aid; there are internal decisions to be made as well.

With Legal Aid preparing to hire recent law school graduates in August, the organization, which



Legal Aid Society of Cleveland executive director Colleen M. Cotter (right) talks with chief administrative officer John Graves (left) and deputy director David Dawson in the firm's West Sixth Street office. The society will begin providing services at the Genesis House in Lorain County.

MARC GOLUB/FILE PHOTO

employs 38 full-time attorneys, is reviewing its pay structure. The pay for newly hired attorneys at Legal Aid is currently set at \$37,500. That's much less than the six-figure salaries offered to new hires by some of the larger law firms around Cleveland.

Legal Aid plans to begin "hoisting" the salaries of their hires as part of the strategic planning process, Ms. Poole said.

"The average amount of debt a law student has is \$80,000 (but) we have to pay much less than most firms," Ms. Poole said. Legal Aid currently receives donations from local law firms to be put toward salaries.

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Leader, members picked for nonprofit's board

Patricia Poole, a partner at Baker & Hostetler LLP and an active Legal Aid board member since 2003, is the new president of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's board of trustees, the governing body for Legal Aid.

In her new role for the nonprofit group, Ms. Poole plans to focus on strategic planning and staff salaries.

"It is important that the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland develop a solid strategic plan to ensure its continued growth and success in the upcoming years," said Ms. Poole,

whose term began July 1.

Other members of the executive committee are vice presidents David Kutik of Jones Day; Edward Icove of Smith and Condeni LLP; and secretary Carole Heyward of Cleveland-Marshall College of Law.

New members of the board of trustees are Ilah Adkins of Charter One bank; Mark Bennett of the Ohio attorney general's office; Ann Berge; Kathleen Kordeleski of Duvin, Cahn & Hutton; Richard Panza of Wickens, Herzer, Panza, Cook & Batista; and Raul Vega.

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