



THE MORNING JOURNAL

12/16/2006

Legal Aid worries judges

ALEX M. PARKER and MATT SUMAN , Morning Journal Writer

ELYRIA -- Two Elyria municipal court judges are worried that too many of the area's poor residents have been left with representation after Legal Aid of Lorain County lost its longtime director.

Judges John Musson and Lisa Locke Graves both sent a letter to the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland outlining concerns about the flow of unrepresented people coming through their courts.

"We were concerned that the level of representation in indigent clients in our courts had dropped significantly," said Musson. "Our civil magistrate has seen more and more defendants coming in and representing themselves, because legal aid representation is not available to them."

Locke Graves said she had also noticed more unrepresented residents coming through her courtroom.

"We're just concerned about what's going to happen to the people who need representation because the staff is dwindled there so much," said Graves.

Officials from the Legal Aid Society wouldn't comment on the resignation of David Taylor, who left the agency in the past months after decades of representing poor Lorain County residents in civil cases where they couldn't represent themselves. They rebuffed a request for any letters of resignation or other documents relating to his resignation.

Richard Panza, attorney and board member, confirmed Taylor's resignation, but said the organization was bringing in new lawyers for its Elyria office and wasn't understaffed.

"The level of service that Legal Aid is providing this community will continue and will be unimpeded," said Panza.

He said although there are fewer lawyers in the office, attorneys from the Cleveland organization's main office have been filling in. Taylor is currently working as interim director of the Lorain County office.

Barbara Ramage, a longtime attorney with the office, also no longer works at Legal Aid, according to the office.

"We're always underfunded, and we're always looking to expand our services to the poor, and we will continue to do that," said Panza. "It's very difficult to obtain a well-qualified attorney for what Legal Aid is required to pay. Replacing people is very, very difficult."

Taylor would not comment on the situation at the organization or his departure.

The Legal Aid Society provides free or discounted legal representation to poor and indigent residents in civil cases, such as foreclosure or small claims court. They do not represent clients in criminal cases.

According to its Web site, the organization is funded through private donations as well as Cuyahoga and Ashtabula counties and United Way.

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