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Story from the Saturday, December 23, 2006 Edition of the Chronicle-Telegram

Judges worried about Legal Aid changes

Brad Dicken

The Chronicle-Telegram

ELYRIA — The number of low-income area residents appearing in local municipal courts without an attorney from the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland by their side has local judges and lawyers worried.

Elyria Municipal Court judges John Musson and Lisa Locke Graves sent the Legal Aid Society a letter earlier this month expressing concern that the number of attorneys in the society's Elyria office had been cut in half and indigent clients aren't getting the representation they need.

"Our concern is that for whatever reason people who normally would be sent to Legal Aid for representation aren't getting the help they need," Musson said.

Colleen Cotter, Legal Aid's executive director, said the agency recently parted ways with its longtime Lorain County branch head, David Taylor, but would not comment on the reasons why.

A temporary branch director has been appointed and the society is also awaiting the results of a paralegal's bar exam and she will likely become a full-fledged lawyer sometime next year.

In the meantime, Cotter said she shares the judge's concerns over how many people are not being represented in civil cases, particularly landlord-tenant disputes and consumer litigation.

Only about 20 percent of those who need legal aid services are actually getting the legal help they need, Cotter said. But that figure is true just about everywhere in the country, she said.

"We're working very hard to close that gap, but unfortunately, that gap is going to continue to exist," Cotter said.

Legal Aid is also hoping it will be able to convince more local attorneys to begin doing pro bono work to meet shortfalls in staffing, she said.

Gayle Reeves, president of the Lorain County Bar Association, said many local attorneys do pro bono work, but her organization has been considering creating a more official program for some time.

"There's a tremendous indigent population that does need legal representation," she said. The staffing woes of Lorain County's Legal Aid branch have sped up the discussions of a pro bono program.

"But we need a lot of cooperation and a lot of work to put something like that together," Reeves said.

