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No cost for kindness

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Legal Aid attorneys Claire Cloud, left, and Abigail C. Staudt talk to a client in the hallway of the Lake County Domestic Relations Court.

Development Melanie Shakarian said.

But "I didn't go to law school to make money," said Staudt, who joined the Peace Corps after college. "I went to law school so I'd be able to use that information to help people."

In 2006, the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's 45 staff attorneys handled 7,721 cases throughout five counties in Northeast Ohio, according to the society's annual report.

The Painesville office, which opened in 1979, handled 6 percent of those.

Legal Aid works the same types of cases as any other law firm, Shakarian said.

Twenty-eight percent of last year's cases were consumer-related; 23 percent were family-related; 20 percent were health-, education-, work- or income-related; and 17 percent were housing-related.

The remainder included individual rights, immigration rights and community development.

"There's always a demand for issues, for instance, related to family or consumer law, because that's what a person most readily identifies with the legal system," Shakarian said. "But there are often times that we do handle cases that are more preventative in nature, that prevent a person from falling into further legal trouble."

Painesville in particular has a large need for housing law attorneys, she said.

Planting a seed

Enter Staudt, who specializes in housing and domestic violence law.

Joining the Peace Corps in 1998, Staudt spent nine months teaching English in Ethiopia, and then, when the program was evacuated because of a war with Eritrea, two years in Madagascar.

The experience reminded her that she was fortunate, but law school "was not on the radar" at the time, she said.

Returning to Chicago in 2001 with a new understanding that she didn't want to teach, Staudt moved to Seattle and became a caseworker at an emergency shelter for homeless women.

"I had been thinking of maybe pursuing a master's in social work, and then several of my clients had legal issues, and I was just really impressed at how the lawyers that they worked with were able to find solutions for them and really impacted my clients' lives in a way that I wasn't able to do," she said.

It wasn't until the woman in charge of the Access to Justice

Low-income residents in Lake, Geauga can get free Legal Aid

Abigail C. Staudt laughed.

Marley F. Eiger thought, "Oh, how boring."

Claire Cloud first worked as a hair stylist, then joined the military.

But the women who run the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's Painesville office all eventually heeded the advice at which they initially scoffed:

"You should be an attorney."

Today, as the only attorneys on staff in Painesville, the three head a mission of justice for more than 20,000 of Lake and Geauga counties' low-income residents.

Staudt was among eight new attorneys hired in 2006 and spread among the private nonprofit organization's offices in Painesville, Ashtabula, Cleveland and Elyria.

They are Legal Aid's largest group of new hires in more than 10 years, made possible in part by new philanthropic contributions.

Of the new eight, Staudt is among four who speak Spanish. Two are black.

Starting salaries were \$33,000 last year, although the board recently voted to "significantly increase" them as a result of better funding, Director of

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Program at Seattle University Law School suggested she study law that Staudt, the daughter of a copyright attorney-turned-professor, finally began to consider it. "She said, 'You've got to go to law school,' and I laughed. There was no way I was going to law school," Staudt said. "But then I thought, 'Well, it would be nice to have an understanding of the law.' "

Staudt watched one client's income triple with Social Security. Another got unsupervised visits with her children. By May 2006, she had assisted in housing, criminal defense and family-need cases at the Cabrini Green Legal Aid and graduated from the Chicago-Kent College of Law.

A job fair landed her in Painesville, where her first case involved a woman defending her Section 8 housing voucher.

Seventy-three percent of the organization's clients are female; many have children.

"It was really amazing for me to be able to facilitate her ability to explain herself," Staudt said. "That was the first time I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm so glad I'm in this job.' "

"After that case, I called my dad up and said, 'Dad, I helped someone keep their housing today,' and that made me feel like law school was worth it."

Got Here On



Accepting help

A more recent client of Staudt's got Social Security about a year ago, but his mental and physical conditions caused him to miss filing deadlines for Section 8 in June.

Greg, who did not want his last name published, had seen the Legal Aid sign in Painesville but didn't learn what the organization did until his most dire moment.

Without Section 8, he would pay \$625 of his \$640 check on rent.

Greg said he tried to play catch-up, to no avail.

"And so I just threw my hands up and said, 'Well, I guess I'll go here, and I don't even know what this place is going to tell me.' I needed them really bad. I just knew I couldn't afford it."

After an interview with the Painesville resident, Staudt joined forces with Greg's representative at Western Reserve Counseling in Painesville and resolved the issue.

"She talked so good for me that we didn't even have to go to court," he said. "I definitely didn't want to go to any court - I imagined Perry Mason or something, where I was going to get scrutinized. I am so thankful, because I didn't know what I was going to do."

Free brief advice clinics, like two soon to be scheduled at the Painesville office, are often held Saturdays in Cuyahoga County.

With Legal Aid attorneys as mentors, those participating in the organization's Volunteer Lawyers Program answer inquiries.

"We're not taking the case representation at that time," Shakarian said. "It's giving people the next steps. Oftentimes, it's telling them to come in for a full interview. Other times, it's advice so they can handle a portion of their case on their own."

Shakarian said the Cleveland organization is one of the most successful volunteer lawyer programs nationwide, with more than 800 regular volunteers who also take more specialized cases pro bono.

Meeting the need

Ann Bergen worked about five years as a Legal Aid staff attorney before starting her private practice in Willoughby.

She continues to donate, volunteer, accept pro bono referrals and serve on the Legal Aid's Board of Trustees. Affected by greater world turmoil, she said working pro bono for the office eases the aching hearts of herself and others.

"It's sort of a lifeboat for the people who have no access to the front door of the courthouse because it's so cumbersome," she said. "So many of the cases that Legal Aid helps with are basic human needs - a roof over your head, being able to sleep quietly and know your children are safe."

"Some people have time, and some people have money, and however they can give, there are opportunities through Legal Aid."

Still, one million cases each year are rejected because of a lack of resources, according to "Documenting the Justice Gap in America," a report published in September 2005 by the Legal Services Corp.

The report reveals that less than 20 percent of those requiring civil legal assistance, and only half of those who seek help from an LSC-funded provider, actually receive it.

Most help is also less than adequate, the report says.

For every private attorney who provides personal services nationwide, there are 525 people; for every low-income attorney, there are 6,861, according to the report.

"There are so many people out there who cannot afford an attorney," Shakarian said.

"It demonstrates that disparity of how many attorneys are out there and how many serve low-income people."

Seeking justice

Cloud, who specializes in family law and estate planning, said she cannot handle the volume of divorce cases she receives.

Between May and July, 33 family law cases were rejected due to lack of resources.

"There's no way we can do the volume, and that's where the private bar is important," Eiger said.

Staudt and Cloud both receive law school loan replacement assistance from a special national pilot program sponsored by the LSC.

The corporation hopes to attract more high-quality attorneys to work for the public interest.

Prominent on the list of public service issues in Lake and Geauga counties are foreclosures, payday lending and mortgage brokers, Eiger said.

"Payday lending is the worst thing," Eiger said. "The interest rates are horrible, horrible. It's because banks aren't providing these kinds of loans for people, so of course there's a vacuum. At every corner in Painesville, there's a payday lender. It's a downward spiral for these people. Every month, they owe more money that they don't have."

Eiger graduated from college with a history degree, but she's been an attorney the past 33 years and said she really admires the people she serves.

Clients come in all kinds - from single parents to folks with disabilities to documented aliens to the elderly or unemployed. Even undocumented aliens can receive Legal Aid assistance if they are victims of domestic violence or trafficking.

Most of the clients are being sued and don't know what to do, she said.

"The income limit is 125 percent of poverty based on household size. The resource limit is \$5,000 (in assets, exempting homes and cars). So they're in pretty dire straits. It's nice to see them feel that things are under control, that the legal system works for them."

Still, Eiger said the law tends to be far more "predator-friendly" than in the 1970s, when an unlikely duo inspired her to get involved.

"I have lots of lawyers in my family, and I thought, 'Oh, how boring. What they do is for rich people and businesses,' " she said. "I didn't really see law as helping ordinary people. My mother said, 'Well, why don't you become a lawyer?' but then Ralph Nader made me think, 'Well, that could be exciting. Listen to Mom.' It's challenging, it's interesting, it's always changing, it's problem-solving, but it's also helping people.

"A lot of times, people say, 'Oh, well, your clients ...' and they roll their eyes, and that's just prejudiced against people who are having a hard time. They're just like everybody else."

About 160 Legal Aid organizations exist nationwide.

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, established in 1905 and one of six in Ohio, worked on a budget of almost \$10.2 million last year.

For more information about Legal Aid and Painesville's upcoming free clinics, call (888) 808-2800 or visit www.lasclev.org.

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