

LEGAL AFFAIRS

Legal Aid hopes wage project will curb workplace abuses

Attorneys will be voice for underrepresented

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Carrie Suhaj of Parma had no idea when she answered an ad in the newspaper for a full-time job as a portrait photographer that within a few months she would max out her credit card, pay for countless tanks of gas and rack up hundreds of miles on her car.

It essentially was costing her to work, she said, but it didn't start that way. She was hired in September 2006 to a salaried position but within a short time she was switched to a commission-only position.

"I couldn't afford it. I was driving all the time, and there wasn't enough work for me to make anything off it," she said.

For Colleen Cotter, executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, stories of workplace troubles like Ms. Suhaj's are all too familiar.

So familiar, in fact, that Ms. Cotter's organization is targeting the issue with a pilot program called the Cleveland Wage Project.

"You don't have to have money to buy justice," Ms. Cotter said. "We're excited to reach the immigrant and Latino communities who are underrepresented due to cultural barriers."

The immigrant community is a

POPULATION AT A GLANCE

The Cleveland Wage Project is targeting members of the area's immigrant and Latino communities for its services.

■ **In 2000**, there were 110,075 foreign-born living in the five counties served by the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, constituting more than 5% of the total population for that region.

■ **Of that total**, about 80% lived in Cuyahoga County, 8.9% in Lake County, 6.7% in Lorain County, 2.3% in Geauga County and 1.5% in Ashtabula County.

■ **In 2005**, 15% of the national labor force, or approximately 20 million workers, were foreign-born. About 9 million were low-wage workers, and 6 million were lower-skilled workers.

■ **The number of foreign-born** in the labor force increased by more than a million between 2005 and 2006, accounting for more than half of the total increase in the U.S. labor force in 2006.

■ **Between 2000 and 2006**, foreign-born workers accounted for more than 47% of the net increase in the total labor force.

SOURCE: LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF CLEVELAND RESEARCH, COMPILED IN PART FROM THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU AND THE URBAN INSTITUTE

focus of the program, which is keying in on workplace abuses such as wage theft, discrimination and unsafe working conditions.

"The objective is that our low-wage project will improve employment opportunities, working conditions and wages and create an adverse environment that discourages unfair wage and employment practices by employers," said Harold L. Williams, managing attorney for Legal Aid's consumer law unit in Cleveland.

"Many of the employers know that an immigrant worker will not complain because of limited English proficiency or a general reluctance to assert their rights," he said.

To reach those needing the services of the Wage Project, Legal Aid is partnering with organizations such as the Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry and the Spanish-American Committee.

In addition, those calling Legal Aid in need of workplace assistance are referred to the Wage Project. Previously, Legal Aid would refer them to the Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, according to Stephanie Jackson, managing attorney of Legal Aid's health-education-work-income unit.

"Before we got the Wage Project we didn't represent this kind of case, and we didn't have anything like the Wage Project," she said.



Harold Williams (left), managing attorney for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's consumer law unit, and Colleen Cotter, the organization's executive director, are targeting workplace abuses such as wage theft, discrimination and unsafe working conditions as part of a pilot program called the Cleveland Wage Project.

JANET CENTURY

Filling a need

For Mr. Williams and other attorneys connected to the initiative, the Wage Project is a small step toward meeting a huge need in the Northeast Ohio community.

"The tragedy is that while the need is so great, there are not nearly enough available attorneys in the area of employment law to represent low-wage immigrant workers who are so easily victimized by unscrupulous employers," he said.

Two attorneys will be hired for the program, which is slated to continue through June 2010. Students from Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland-Marshall College of Law will track statistics to measure the success of the program.

Funding for the project is coming from a one-year \$25,000 grant from the Cleveland-based Thomas H. White Foundation and a three-year \$380,000 grant from the Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation.

Grants — and more lawyers — are needed, agrees Ms. Jackson, who will eventually supervise the two attorneys for wage program.

"The needs are overwhelming," she said.

David Dawson, Legal Aid's deputy director, said prior to 1996 and welfare reform, many of the organization's clients were recipients of public assistance. Financial eligibility to receive help from Legal Aid is based on federal poverty income guidelines.

"The poor need our services and that hasn't changed," he said. "But so many of our new clients now are the 'working poor.' They don't qualify for public assistance or benefits."

Allison Rand, program officer at the Thomas H. White Foundation, said Legal Aid delivers tremendous value because traditional legal services are so expensive and often unattainable.

As for Ms. Suhaj's complaints about her photography job — her case was settled for an undisclosed amount after she called Legal Aid in early March, according to information from Ms. Suhaj and the organization.

"I met with a lawyer in the middle of March, and they settled in the middle of June this year," she said. "If I didn't have Legal Aid, I'd still be fighting. I definitely recommend others make the call, it's worth it." ■



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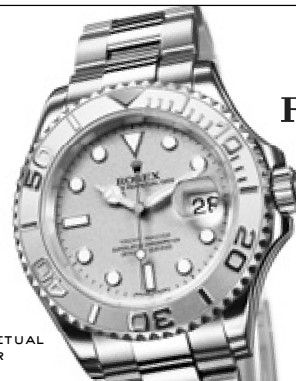
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