



INFORMATION FROM
The
Legal Aid Society
of Cleveland
Since 1905



Clinics bring legal services to residents

Taking one step back can make clear exactly where you're going. That certainly has proved true for The Legal Aid Society's Volunteer Lawyer Program. Just a few short years ago, Legal Aid looked at its current pro bono model and decided it was time for expansion and innovation.

At the same time, David Kutik, Cleveland Bar Association president from 2004-2005, was launching the initiative, "Our Commitment to Our Community," focusing on engaging private attorneys in pro bono work. Armed with the results of an extensive review conducted by the ABA Center for Pro Bono, Legal Aid's managing attorney of intake and the Volunteer Lawyers Program, Ann McGowan Porath, set out to answer the big question: How can we make our pro bono program better? The obvious follow-up question was, how do we maximize a collaboration with the bar associations?

"Legal Aid has always had a pro bono program," said Porath. "We realized, however, that we needed to reenergize our efforts. Due to funding changes over the years, we had closed down offices and lost our presence in the Cleveland neighborhoods."

In 2005, Legal Aid rolled out the first of many Brief Advice and Referral Clinics held in flagship locations on both the East Side and West Side of Cleveland: West Side Catholic Center, Martin de Porres Family Center and the Spanish American Committee.

The Cleveland Bar Association recruited attorney volunteers. For the VLP's inaugural year, more than 700 attorneys and 130 law students collectively volunteered to assist the poor with legal problems. Together, they served more than 1,500 additional clients.

Year 2006: Into the Neighborhoods

"Last year, we added new locations which has not only made us more accessible, but has allowed us to increase the numbers of individuals we serve,"

says Howard Strain, Legal Aid's Jones Day Pro Bono Fellow.

Strain has been working with Cleveland City Council members to identify and secure appropriate clinic locations. Recently, he received a call from Ward 3 Councilman Zachary Reed inviting the VLP to the Murtis H. Taylor Center in the Union-Kinsman area. By the end of 2006, 30 clients had their legal needs met at this new location.

"Soon afterwards, we decided to expand on that idea," said Strain. "We talked with Councilwoman Nina Turner from Ward 1 and were able to hold a clinic in her ward. And, we did the same in Councilman Kevin Kelley's Ward 16 in Old Brooklyn."

As Porath points out, "Cleveland is really a city of neighborhoods. Members of one neighborhood are not going to travel to another to get the help they need. So, we've got to bring our clinics to them."

In 2006, over 575 people presenting over 630 different legal problems were helped through neighborhood clinics. These numbers represent a 40 percent increase over the totals for Year 2005.

The effect on the poor in Cleveland has an even further reach, since the advice provided usually impacts more than the individual. Many times, the problems involve entire families facing eviction, mothers seeking special education services for children, or husbands and wives facing bankruptcy.

With 24 clinics held in 2006, private attorney involvement grew. Members of private firms, corporate counsel, government attorneys and others discovered that what they receive through volunteerism is often many times greater than what they give. Corporate attorneys, who have little client contact during their day, were able to gain the experience of taking cases to litigation. Staff attorneys from the Court of Common Pleas had the opportunity to be an attorney for a private

party - something they would never have time for in their work at the court.

"All the attorneys come away with a different view of the issues facing people in poverty," said Porath. "They find out that there are layers to these problems. The attorneys are able to peel back the layers and help people who have nowhere else to go."

Alida H. Struze, who manages VLP's One-on-One Attorney Client Match program, added, "The program gives clients a new image of attorneys and goes a long way in spreading good will."

Year 2007: More Services to More People

VLP's goal for 2007 was to offer 50 brief advice and extended advice clinics in additional neighborhood locations. Again, Cleveland had been named the "poorest city in the nation" so the challenges remain and grow. Certainly VLP's presence in more neighborhoods and increased commitment to serve those clinics with more attorneys and law students will continue to help the poor receive equal justice under the law. However, new partnerships within the community are needed.

Specialty clinics providing focused advice in specific need areas will continue to expand in the coming year. Plans are underway to add new offerings to the already successful immigration and divorce clinics.

Attorneys offer unique skills to fight poverty. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and its team of volunteer lawyers will continue to build on what they do best: promote justice, prevent domestic violence, fight consumer fraud, enforce rights under employment laws, advocate for civil rights, prevent homelessness, protect children, and support efforts to bring affordable housing, jobs and services to low-income communities.

Find out more by contacting The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland at (216) 697-1900, or visit lasclev.org.

By **KUSH AZRAEL**
 Staff Reporter

Washington - Barack Obama said last week at Howard University that as president he would relax drug sentencing laws and address vast racial inequalities in the justice system as part of his crime policy. He said he would review mandatory minimum drug sentencing and give first-time non-violent drug offenders a chance to serve their sentence in a drug rehabilitation program instead of prison. He also said the punishment for crack cocaine should not be more severe than the punishment for powder cocaine when the real difference is where the people are using them or who is using them.

Washington - An investigation is continuing to determine whether a recent attack on a Black student at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf at Gallaudet University was a hate crime. The Sept. 29 incident began in dorms of the secondary school on the university's campus. According to D.C. police seven students held down a Black student and wrote "KKK" and drew swastikas on his body with a marker. So far no charges have been filed against the students who range in age from 15 to 19.

Washington - Last week a coalition of Black professionals announced efforts to raise \$50 million to build a waterfront memorial in Washington to acknowledge the contributions of Benjamin Banneker, a Black scientist who helped design the nation's capital in 1791. The memorial, planned for the L'Enfant Plaza corridor in D.C. would also include a 20-foot bronze statue of Banneker.

Guinea - A development project in Guinea has received a \$10 million grant from the UN International Fund for Agriculture (IFAD) as part of efforts to provide poor rural families in the West African