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Bar may fill in for Legal Aid shortage

PRO BONO: Lorain County
Bar Association says it will
ramp up volunteer efforts

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Morning Journal Writer

ELYRIA — The Lorain County Bar Association is considering ratcheting up its pro bono efforts to help combat the dwindling services provided by Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, the association's president, Gayle Reeves, said yesterday.

Reeves said the bar association discussed on Monday its plans to look at a structure for attorneys' pro bono, or volunteer, work that would best serve clients in need of help in civil cases.

Reeves recently spoke with Elyria Municipal Court Judge John Musson, who asked what the county bar association could do to help with residents' legal needs in civil cases. Earlier this year, Musson said he plans to track how many people seek assistance from the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's Elyria office for civil issues are turned away and end up representing themselves in the courtroom.

Musson said the best way to prevent people from representing themselves in civil cases would be for Legal Aid to hire more attorneys for the Elyria office. He said he is glad that the local bar association is looking into the issue.

"Pro bono work by the local bar would be a help," Musson said.

Colleen Cotter, executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, which oversees the Elyria office, could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Cotter said Monday that increased representation by private attorneys and improved referral procedures with local courts are some ways that legal needs for civil cases of the poor could be better met. Court-appointed attorneys represent defendants who cannot hire a lawyer in criminal cases.

The legal aid office in Elyria had

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six attorneys and support staff in the 1990s, but that number is down to two, with a third scheduled to take the bar exam next month, Cotter said. David Dawson, deputy director of the Legal Aid Society of

Cleveland, has been managing the Elyria office since W. David Taylor, a managing attorney for decades, left late last year. Dawson could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Reeves said concerns about people representing themselves in Elyria Municipal Court have been brought forward since Taylor's departure,

throwing the local legal aid office into transition. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland is currently searching for Taylor's replacement.

Musson said attorneys take an oath to do work for the good of the public. Many court-appointed attorneys in criminal cases are paid much less than private attorneys for work, Musson said.