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Legal Aid staff to increase

MATT SUMAN , Morning Journal Writer

ELYRIA -- The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has received several applications for the managing attorney job in its Elyria office and is moving ahead with plans to pump up its local staff back to what it was six years ago.

In recent weeks, Elyria Municipal Court Judges John Musson and Lisa Locke-Graves have voiced concerns that poor residents who cannot hire attorneys for civil cases were representing themselves in court after they were turned away by the local Legal Aid office.

Court-appointed attorneys represent defendants who cannot hire a lawyer in criminal cases, while Legal Aid takes on civil cases such as landlord/tenant disputes and domestic relations issues.

David Dawson, deputy director for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, has been the managing attorney since W. David Taylor left the organization late last year after decades of service. Melanie Shakarian, director of development for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, said the organization is in the process of hiring Taylor's replacement and expect to start interviewing candidates very soon.

"We have had a high amount of applications for the managing attorney," she said.

Both Taylor and Legal Aid representatives have declined to say why Taylor left.

The Lorain County office on Broad Street in Elyria was once its own entity and had six attorneys and support staff in the 1990s. But state and federal governments consolidated Northeast Ohio offices with Cleveland's Legal Aid in 2000.

Besides Dawson, the Elyria branch has two temporary attorneys hired under contract, a paralegal and two support staff members, Shakarian said. Angela Wu, whom Legal Aid has hired to handle domestic relations issues in Lorain County, is training and will take the bar exam next month, she said.

The contract attorneys will still be used to help with training the new managing attorney and Wu while they are working on pending cases, Shakarian said. Dawson will work out of the Elyria office as long as it takes to get organized, she said.

Meanwhile, the Lorain County Bar Association met Monday, and its president Gayle Reeves said the plan is to set up a meeting with representatives from Elyria Municipal Court, the local bar association and the Legal Aid office to discuss meeting the needs of indigent people in civil cases.

Both Dawson and Richard Panza, an Avon attorney on the Legal Aid board, more pro bono, or volunteer, service is needed from local attorneys.

"I think that has been lacking," Panza said. "People are much too interested in developing their own practice."

Reeves has said the local bar is looking into whether it should have a more formal way of dispensing pro bono work to attorneys. Panza said the Ohio Supreme Court

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should consider making pro bono work mandatory.

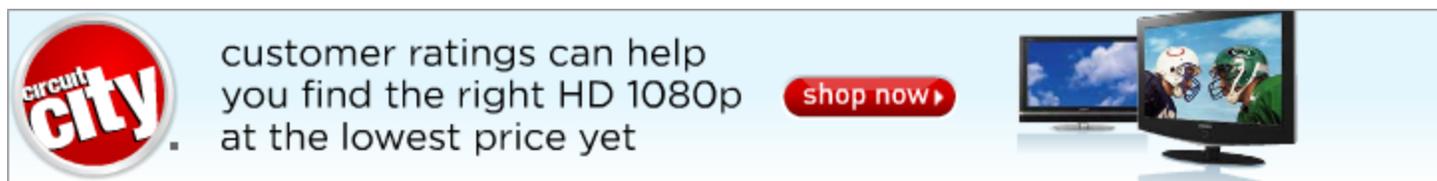
But since many attorneys specialize in a certain area, it can be tough to match volunteers with cases of people who need it, Panza said. Dawson said Elyria Municipal Court representatives may have noticed the unmet needs of indigent people in civil cases because Magistrate Richard Schwartz worked for the local Legal Aid office for a number of years.

Panza said that though Musson, Locke-Graves and the Lorain County Bar Association sent letters about their concerns of people not being represented, he never received a phone call.

"If you have got a problem, call me up," he said.

Colleen Cotter, executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, said unmet legal needs are a national problem, and Legal Aid typically turns away half of the people who seek its help.

"We will still have underrepresented people (after the Elyria office is at full staff)," she said.



The advertisement features the Circuit City logo on the left, which consists of a red circle with the words "circuit city" in white. To the right of the logo, the text reads "customer ratings can help you find the right HD 1080p at the lowest price yet". A red button with the text "shop now" and a white arrow pointing right is positioned to the right of the text. On the far right, there are two flat-screen televisions; the one in the foreground is larger and shows a scene with a dinosaur and a person, while the one behind it is smaller and shows a blue sky with clouds.

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