

CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

PM CIRC. 34,382

ELYRIA, OH

JAN-22-2007

# Lorain County needs its Legal Aid

465

Late last December, I read in this paper that city and county judges were worried about the many low-income area residents who were appearing in court without an attorney from Legal Aid. That worried me too because I know a little about the operation of Legal Aid. In the '80s and '90s, I had the honor of serving on the board of the Legal Aid Society of Lorain County.

Legal Aid, which has existed for more than 100 years, performs a vital function for indigent and low-income people in need of civil legal services. The society represents these people, without charge, in matters of divorce, landlord-tenant relationships, custody, consumer law and other civil matters. Now it seems that Legal Aid in Lorain County is hardly providing such services.

Funding for Legal Aid is complex. Money comes from the Legal Services Corporation, a private, non-profit, non-partisan corporation created "with bipartisan congressional sponsorship" in 1974 under President Nixon. But most of the funding comes from the



HARVEY GITTLER

state: from court costs, interest on certain trusts, and various legal funds. Several county organizations such as United Way and the county commissioners also contribute.

The 2000 census showed a shift in population in Lorain County and under directions from the Legal Services Corporation in Washington, the Lorain County organization was merged into the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

Those of you who have worked in industry know what happens when a big fish swallows a small fish. If the small fish is allowed to continue, it never functions at its previous level. So it is with non-profit organizations. The Legal Aid Society of Lorain County now is just a small part of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

I was able to serve on the

board of the Lorain County organization because of how the board is constituted. Back then, approximately two-thirds of board members were lawyers appointed by the Lorain County Bar Association. Approximately one-third were low-income people who could qualify as clients and were appointed by various county social agencies. I was the candidate who qualified as neither a client nor a lawyer.

As I recall, the staff included six attorneys, one paralegal, several administrative assistants and the director, who was also an attorney. In addition, when the work load went beyond what the staff could handle, other county attorneys, from both large and small firms, assisted by taking cases on a pro bono basis — without charge, as a public service.

Board meetings were fascinating for me as a non-lawyer. The discussions might have been routine for the lawyers, but deciding what particular cases to take and what legal strategies to follow intrigued me.

And then, when board members from the low-income spectrum spoke up, it was shocking. The struggles those people had in securing legal justice, the manner in which various companies took advantage of them, and the ordeals they went through just to survive were overwhelming. I did feel that I was able to give the board a perspective that justified my membership.

Just the other day, I visited the Elyria office of the present Legal Aid Society. It is a shell of its former self. At the end of this month, the only full-time attorney left is leaving. What the deputy director, who comes in from the Cleveland office, directs, I don't know. Lorain County holds two seats on the Cleveland board but the Cleveland Bar Association, not the Lorain County Bar Association, appointed both members.

The local judges were right. The indigent in Lorain County now have virtually no representation through Legal Aid.

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