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Local attorneys also have duty to provide free work for indigent in civil cases

A perceived lack of Legal Aid lawyers to represent indigent clients who have civil cases in Elyria Municipal Court has drawn a considerable amount of attention recently.

It has been pointed out that the number of Legal Aid staff attorneys has fallen dramatically here since the Lorain County Legal Aid operation ceased to be an independent entity and became part of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland in 2000.

At least one critic has questioned whether Lorain County is getting its money's worth anymore from court fees that go toward paying the cost of free Legal Aid representation for the indigent.

Those are potentially troubling observations, but after a recent meeting with Legal Aid representatives from Lorain County and the Cleveland Legal Aid headquarters, we're confident that the situation is neither as dire as feared nor is there a lack of attention being given to providing adequate Legal Aid representation to the indigent in Lorain County.

When local Legal Aid lawyers have not been available for a client, then that client could be served by a lawyer sent here by the Cleveland Legal Aid office.

The Legal Aid staff in the group's Lorain County office in Elyria is in the process of being grown back toward its former level. The needs of Lorain county's indigent are taken seriously by Legal Aid's leadership in Cleveland, and the county is not being shortchanged.

Indigent clients come to Legal Aid for help with civil matters such as landlord-tenant troubles, consumer complaints, divorce and domestic issues.

Even with a full staff, Legal Aid officials note, they would still not be able to accommodate everyone who came to them for help. They typically turn away half the people coming to their offices, usually because those people's situations are open-and-shut and there is no legal issue for a lawyer to contest; for instance, they either paid their rent, or they didn't.

Legal Aid also is hoping to see a rise in the number of attorneys in private practice who will volunteer their time to represent indigent clients for free, on behalf of Legal Aid.

Richard Panza, a prominent Lorain County attorney and Legal Aid board member, cited a lack of such volunteer service from the Lorain County legal community, and he will be working to increase the level of donated legal services. Panza insisted that good lawyers can make the time for volunteer Legal Aid work, it is just a matter of priorities.

In some states, lawyers are required to provide a certain amount of free volunteer legal work. Ohio is not among them, nor should it necessarily be. A proposal to require reporting of any donated legal service hours is being considered in Ohio; that could be an indirect way of encouraging such work. But in the end, we agree with Panza that performing some free work, such as with Legal Aid, is an obligation that comes with the privilege of being a member of the legal profession.

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We encourage the Lorain County Bar Association to foster an awareness of that obligation among its membership.

There is no lack of lawyers in Lorain County, and any one of them is perfectly capable of providing free volunteer legal services to the indigent through Legal Aid.



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