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## OUR OPINION

# 465 Legal Aid's coverage of county is a concern

It's a relief to know that the Lorain County branch office of The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland will eventually be staffed by more than one lawyer. Legal Aid Executive Director Colleen Cotter said Thursday that the organization is trying to hire two more lawyers to work in that office.

It would be better, of course, to go back to the old days — before the Lorain County Legal Aid office was forced to merge with the Cleveland office — when as many as six lawyers worked here, serving the county's poor people who needed help in court with civil matters.

That's not likely to happen anytime soon. In Ohio and across the country, Cotter says, funding for Legal Aid is insufficient for the organization to help everyone who comes looking for help.

Cotter sees strength in Legal Aid's structure. Her organization employs 45 lawyers who cover five counties: Cuyahoga, Lorain, Lake, Geauga and Ashtabula. When seen as one big law firm, she said, this organization can offer lawyers who specialize in all types of civil litigation.

Therefore, Cotter said, it's difficult to compare the Legal Aid of today to the Legal Aid of a decade ago. "It's just a different creature, and I think it's a stronger organization today. And we have a lot of potential for future growth."

Still, we worry that Lorain County's low-income residents will be underserved. In 2005, 76 percent of the cases Legal Aid handled were in Cuyahoga County, while only 10 percent were in Lorain County. Granted, Cuyahoga has far more people than Lorain, and a greater percentage of its population is classified as poor. We hope, however, that Legal Aid continuously monitors its resources to make sure that Lorain County residents are getting their fair share of attention.

Also, we encourage our local lawyers to volunteer their services to assist Legal Aid in its mission. Through the organization's Volunteer Lawyers Program, more than 700 lawyers and 130 law students collectively served more than 1,500 clients in 2005. Legal Aid should make every effort to enhance this program, but it should not expect volunteers to fill the gap in Lorain County.

We wish we shared Cotter's confidence in the society's capacity to serve this county's poor, but we are convinced that the merger has damaged its effectiveness here and we remain skeptical about the future.

It's up to Legal Aid to prove that it can hire competent lawyers and maximize its efficiency so that the poor of Lorain County get the legal help they deserve.