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Legal Aid hires new managing attorney for Elyria office

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CLEVELAND -- The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has hired Jessica Baggett, a long-time Lorain County Domestic Relations Court magistrate, as the new managing attorney for its office in Elyria.

Baggett, who has worked in domestic relations court for 11½ years, submitted her resignation for that position yesterday. She will start with orientation at the Lorain County Legal Aid office on March 30, said Melanie Shakarian, Legal Aid's director of development.

Baggett will be trained by David Dawson, deputy director for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, who has been the acting managing attorney since W. David Taylor left the organization late last year. Taylor and Legal Aid have refused to say why he left.

Shakarian said Baggett's experience and connections to the domestic relations court helped her stand out from other candidates. Legal Aid handles a large number of cases that are in domestic relations court, she said.

"She's going to bring wonderful connections," Shakarian said. "It's a very important asset."

Baggett had worked with the Southeast Ohio Legal services and Ohio State Legal Services in Zanesville.

Baggett said she needs to work with Dawson in the next few weeks to get accustomed with the office to further define her goals as the new leader.

"I will try the best I can to meet the needs of the indigent of the county," she said.

Baggett will have input on Legal Aid's plans to hire two more full-time staff attorneys for the Elyria office, Shakarian said. With Baggett's hire, the Elyria office will have six people to handle cases.

Late last year, Elyria Municipal Court judges John Musson and Lisa Locke Graves 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.

Musson said he hopes the addition of Baggett could help reduce the amount of unmet legal needs in the area.

"It fills another position out here which is helpful," he said.

Gayle Reeves, president of the Lorain County Bar Association, said a meeting is planned for the end of the month to discuss local attorneys free work for Legal Aid.

"It's a matter of talking what kind of program," she said.

A permanent managing attorney in the Elyria office should make it easier to work out details of the program, Reeves said.

As for domestic relations court, Baggett's last work day will be March 27, according to her letter of resignation. Domestic Relations Court Administrator Doug Messer said court officials will work with the county department of job and family services and make a recommendation about whether to hire a replacement.

The recommendation is expected to be presented to the domestic relations judges at a meeting on March 19, Messer said.

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