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Legal Aid Society takes big first step to rebuild a staff in Lorain County

In hiring Jessica Baggett to run its office in Elyria, the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has taken a big step toward rebuilding its staff and services in Lorain County.

But it's only a first step. More hirings are planned to beef up the staff closer to the numbers it enjoyed several years ago before national leaders mandated folding Lorain County's Legal Aid office into the Cleveland Legal Aid Society.

Also needed is strong volunteer assistance to Legal Aid from members of the Lorain County Bar Association. Attorneys have a professional obligation to provide some service at no cost to those in need. The bar association has begun moves toward planning such an effort.

The Legal Aid Society represents people who would benefit from having a lawyer but can't afford one in civil cases only; typically that includes things like consumer complaints and landlord-tenant disputes. In criminal cases, lawyers are provided by the court for indigent defendants.

Concerns were raised late last year by Elyria Municipal Court Judge John Musson and Judge Lisa Locke Graves. With the local Legal Aid staff much diminished, the judges said it seemed that more people were appearing in their courts without lawyers after being turned away by Legal Aid.

Because an estimated \$500,000 in court fees from Lorain County helps to pay for the operation of Legal Aid across this region, some critics questioned whether Lorain County residents were getting their money's worth in help from Legal Aid.

Early this year, Legal Aid leaders from Cleveland acknowledged the reduced staff in Elyria, but said lawyers had been coming here from Cleveland to assist. They also spoke of plans to hire a new managing attorney for the Elyria office -- plans fulfilled with Baggett's hiring -- plus more staff attorneys.

Baggett appears to be a fine choice for the job. She has worked 12 years as a magistrate in the Lorain County juvenile and domestic relations courts. She previously worked with a Legal Aid program in Zanesville, and she starts her new Legal Aid job in Elyria on March 30.

We've got high expectations for Baggett, so while applauding her hiring, we'll also be watching closely for her to finish the job of improving Legal Aid services locally, as will judges Musson and Locke Graves, no doubt.

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