

# CMBA's Power to Partner and Lead for Justice

by Colleen M. Cotter

Congratulations to the leadership of the new Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association. By joining the Cuyahoga County Bar Association and the Cleveland Bar Association you have opened many doors to powerful partnerships. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's attorneys have long been members of the two former bars, and Legal Aid has partnered with both bars to ensure greater access to justice for the low income community. We are looking forward to carrying these partnerships on with the CMBA, and to developing even more and greater partnerships.

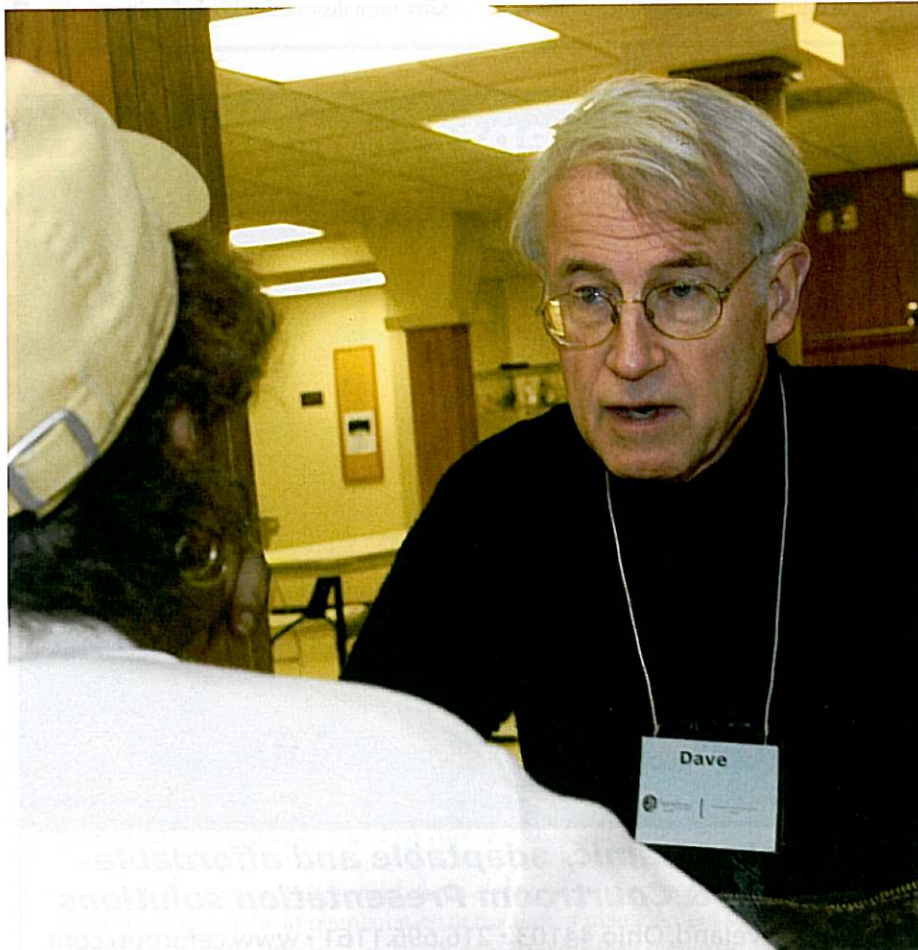
Each and every day The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland

faces the awesome responsibility of working for justice and healthy communities. Legal Aid's clients are low income people who are confronted with a legal problem that threatens their shelter, their access to education or income, or their health or safety. The problems they face are life problems that have a legal resolution. They are in need of an attorney to enforce their rights and resolve those problems.

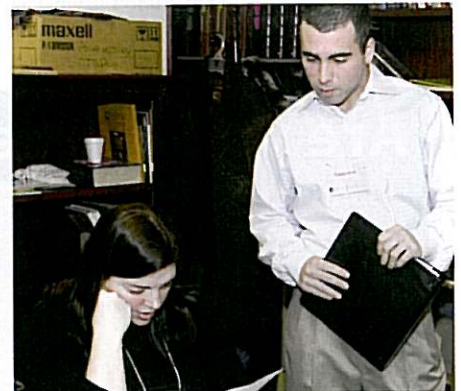
Legal Aid's attorneys and pro bono volunteers – especially those connected with the CMBA – use the power of the law to right wrongs and assist people on the path to a better life. In doing so, we are striving to build healthy communities where people live in safe, stable homes, with adequate food, a sense of security, a good

education that connects them with good jobs, and lives of dignity, decency and hope.

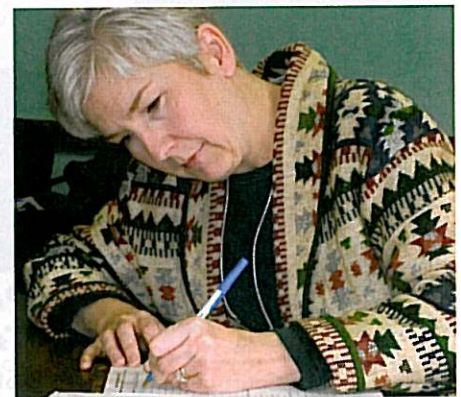
Why is this necessary? It is more than the simple ethical obligation of attorneys to provide pro bono service. There is an incredible need. In 2005, the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), the national funder of legal aid organizations in the United States, released "Documenting the Justice Gap in America: The Current Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans," a report that concludes that at least 80 percent of the civil legal needs of low-income Americans are not being met. The report was a culmination of a year-long study by LSC to document the extent to which current civil legal needs of low-income



David Dawson of Legal Aid works with an individual at a Legal Aid Brief Advice Clinic. Photo Credit: Legal Aid



Jennifer Lawry Adams of Ulmer & Berne works with CWRU law student Andrew November at a Legal Aid clinic. Photo Credit: Jaime Janos and Legal Aid



Anne Ford of Jones Day writes up notes at a Legal Aid Brief Advice and Referral Clinic. Photo Credit: Legal Aid

Americans are not being met, taking into account all the changes in the civil justice system in the last decade. In America generally, there is one lawyer for every 525 people. That's more lawyers per capita than in any other country. In contrast, according to the LSC report, there is only one lawyer for every 7,000 low income persons. These statistics define the "justice gap" in America, and Legal Aid's challenge to serve those in need.

In any given year, 20,000 people seek help from Legal Aid. Last year, Legal Aid handled more than 8,000 cases. 8,000 served where over 20,000 seek Legal Aid's help, and thousands more had legal problems and never came to Legal Aid. We cannot close this gap alone.

Because of this, we welcome the opportunity to work with the newly created CMBA. The organized, and now consolidated, bar plays a special role in ensuring that all people have access to justice to enforce their rights. By bringing together all members of the bar in Cuyahoga County, the CMBA is positioned to carry on the tremendously successful programs of the CCBA and the CBA, such as the Pro Bono Bankruptcy Project, the C. Lyonel Jones Immigration Pro Bono Committee, Pro Bono Dissolution Mediation Project,

the annual Volunteer Day and many other ongoing activities of the Justice for All Committee.

Now, the CMBA has the ability to deliver the same, powerful message to all attorneys in Cuyahoga County – that service is part of our responsibility as attorneys. That ensuing justice is our responsibility. That together we can and should work to build a more just community, a more healthy community. The CMBA has the history of the CCBA and CBA on which to build, together with the power of the new partnership to be a leader in this community, in the state, and nationally.

The CMBA took the opportunity on April 1, just one month following its creation, to partner with the statewide Save the Dream project, the only statewide collaborate foreclosure legal assistance program in the U.S. The effort, which includes the Governor's Office, the Department of Commerce, the Attorney General, the Chief Justice, the Ohio State Bar Association and the legal programs, is aimed at preventing foreclosure. Save the Dream increases Legal Aid's capacity to serve the community and preserve homeownership. Legal Aid staff attorneys will continue to provide free legal assistance to victims of foreclosure, but our work will now be expanded because of hundreds of volunteer attorneys. We are hopeful that this partnership will

help to stem the tide of foreclosures in northeast Ohio. Pro Bono attorneys, many who are CMBA members, will be an important component of this project and the CMBA exhibited the power of its new partnership by hosting a press conference, encouraging its members to volunteer in this new effort to save homes.

Legal Aid has always enjoyed widespread and energetic engagement of private attorneys in representing low income clients. Private attorneys are an important resource to help respond to the legal needs of low income communities. Today, we are proud to witness the creation of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association, and the promise it provides for further partnership to serve the needs of our community. ■



*Colleen M. Cotter, a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and the Indiana University School of Law, became Legal Aid's executive director in 2005. Her legal career has been devoted to public interest work. After law school, she was a U.S. Court of Appeals law clerk (Sixth Circuit), and continued her career in legal services at Pine Tree Legal Assistance (Maine) and Indiana Legal Services.*



Chris Fisher and Stan Prybe, both of Ulmer & Berne, provide brief advice to an individual at a Legal Aid clinic at the West Side Catholic Center.

*Photo Credit: Jaime Janos and Legal Aid*



Kelly Scanlon and Kathleen Burke, both of Jones Day, discuss a case at a Legal Aid clinic at St. Martin de Porres Center in Glenville. *Photo Credit: Legal Aid*



Colleen Cotter, Legal Aid executive director, and Ann McGowan Porath, managing partner of Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program, present an award to David Kutik of Jones Day, recognizing his firm's ongoing commitment to "Our Commitment to Our Community." *Photo Credit: Legal Aid*