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News

Lawyers to give services away

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By Tracey Read

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The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland is expected to see a 35 percent increase in demand this year from those who need fair and open access to the legal system but cannot afford an attorney.

So for the first time, the American Bar Association is sponsoring a National Pro Bono Week Celebration to encourage more lawyers to give their services away for free to help those going through tough economic times.

"There are more low-income people now who have legal needs in the community," said Melanie Shakarian, director of development for The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. "Legal Aid remedies these problems to provide access to health, safety and shelter, and ensures individuals have access to education and employment opportunities.

"As unemployment increases, Legal Aid helps individuals navigate the legal system. As foreclosures and evictions continue to rise, Legal Aid fights to prevent homelessness."

There are currently 1,400 attorneys who volunteer for the organization in Northeast Ohio to supplement the work of Legal Aid's 55 staff attorneys.

This week, Legal Aid is hosting a series of events in collaboration with bar associations in Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake and Lorain counties.

"The need for additional (lawyer) volunteers has never been more critical," Ann Bergen, a Willoughby attorney and member of the Pro Bono Committee, told her colleagues in a letter asking for help.

One of the main Pro Bono Week events in Lake County will be a training session for attorneys who hope to represent low-income homeowners at mediation in foreclosure cases. The program will be Wednesday at Hellriegel's Restaurant in Painesville Township.

Speakers include Lake County Common Pleas Judge Eugene A. Lucci, who will explain the mediation process.

"Thirty-five attorneys from Lake County have already signed up for this. It's really great that the private bar is willing to help out," Shakarian said.

Another Lake County highlight is the Pro Se Divorce Clinic for those who need help with family law matters who don't normally qualify for Legal Aid.

Legal experts say the number of people choosing to represent themselves in divorce court is skyrocketing.

"The purpose of the Pro Se — which is Latin for 'on your own' — Clinic is to educate folks to fill out the forms correctly to alleviate stress in the court," Shakarian said.

"We also want to make sure people get the right advice and know what to do."

Shakarian said she thinks Pro Bono Week will become an annual event.

At their Thursday meeting, Lake County commissioners declared Oct. 25 through Oct. 31 "Pro Bono Week" in the county.

The Pro Se Divorce Clinics will be Friday in three different locations by appointment only.

Lake and Geauga county residents may call 440-352-6200 to register. Ashtabula County residents should call 440-576-8120.

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