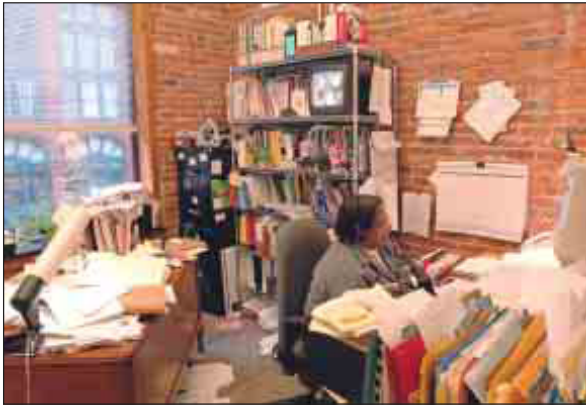


# LEGAL AFFAIRS

## Aid: Caseload increasing despite limited resources



**Consumer attorney Andrea Price wades through her casework in her very busy office. The Legal Aid Society takes on 8,500 cases annually.**

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to provide high-quality legal services to those who need them the most.

They aid people such as Ruby Davis, a mother of three who took a job that required her to be at work when her 8-year-old son, Keontae, needed to be dropped off and picked up from school.

Ms. Davis secretly followed her son home from school one day last year, the only day she allowed the young boy with learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to walk the seven-minute route alone. Keontae had to cross a busy intersection without the help of a school guard, and within minutes was lost and scared. So was his mom.

She asked the school to provide transportation for her son, but the school said he should be able to walk alone. That's when Keontae's psychologist, Dr. Britt Nielsen at MetroHealth Medical Center, gave Ms. Davis the most unexpected treatment — a referral to Mallory Curran, a lawyer with the Legal Aid Society who coordinates the Family Advocacy Program at MetroHealth. "When she stepped in, they did something," said Ms. Davis, 32, of Cleveland, whose son promptly began receiving transportation.

According to a recently released study by Legal Services Corp., a nonprofit established by Congress in 1974 to assure equal justice for all Americans, there is one legal aid attorney for every 6,861 people in the low-income bracket. In contrast, there is one attorney for every 525 people in the general population, according to Legal Services, the Legal Aid Society's largest financial backer.

Colleen Cotter, the Legal Aid Society's new executive director who oversees a budget of more than \$6 million, said reaching out to potential clients will be a focus as the society begins its second century of service.

"One of our goals is to raise more money and the other is to reach out to unserved communities, specifically those with language barriers, the elderly and disabled communities," Ms. Cotter said.

### A calling of sorts

When you ask Legal Aid attorneys about their career paths, the answers invariably focus on bettering others.

Maria Smith, an attorney who splits her time between housing

cases and those dealing with health, education, work and income, has anywhere between 50 to 60 open cases at any given time.

"I try not to count," she said with a smile. She spends about 80% of her time on housing cases that fill a fast-moving docket.

"I went to law school wanting to represent the poor," Ms. Smith said. "My goal was to be part of the movement to change the world and make the world a more just place."

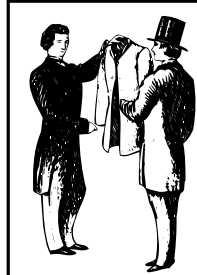
But the society faces attracting

new attorneys to a job with a starting salary of about \$33,000, compared to the \$110,000 starting salary paid at private law firms in the area.

"We want to maintain our caliber of attorneys," Ms. Shakarian said. "We have top graduates from Cleveland-Marshall and Case Western Reserve University, of course, but we also have attorneys from Harvard, NYU and Penn."

Ms. Cotter said Legal Aid lawyers work with passion.

"People are here doing this for a lot less than they could make in the private sector and they are doing it because they are dedicated to our clients," she said. "It's a lifetime commitment for a lot of us."



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Melanie Shakarian, director of development at Legal Aid, said the organization's attorneys such as Ms. Curran "really see ourselves as dealing with a lot of threshold issues of poverty."

### Growing clientele

The face of poverty certainly has changed since C. Lyonel Jones assumed the post of executive director of the Legal Aid Society 39 years ago.

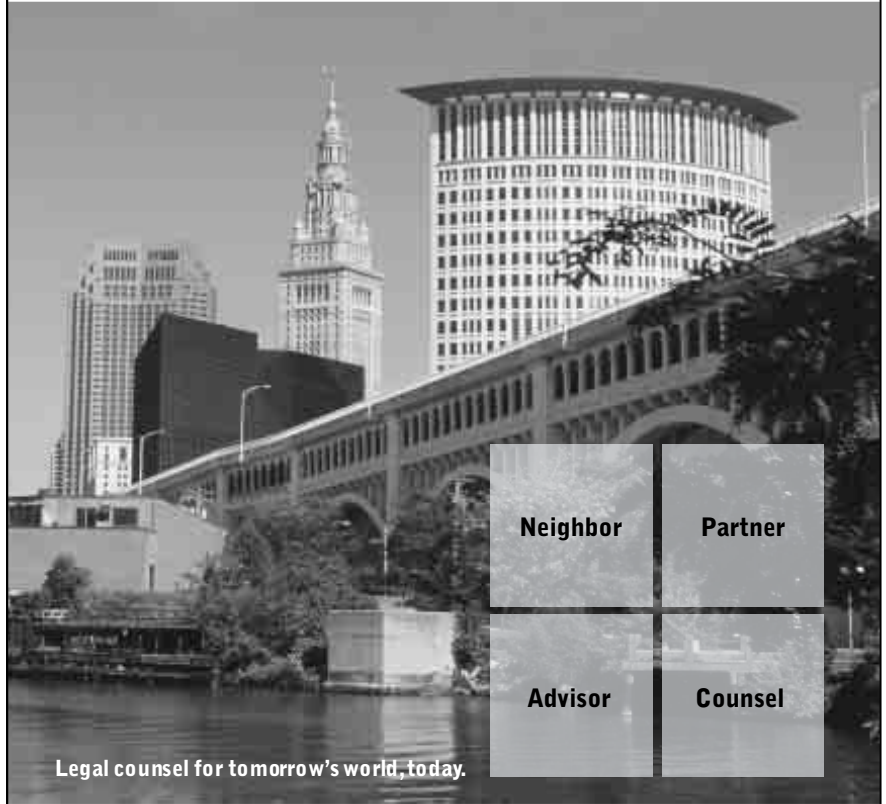
"When I initially started we were basically only representing people who were unemployed or on public assistance," said Mr. Jones, 72, who recently retired from the executive director's job. "Now we are representing people who are working but still are poor in terms of the definition and in terms of need and in terms of ability to afford counsel."

Indeed, more than 300,000 residents of Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake and Lorain counties live in poverty and qualify for the Legal Aid Society's services.

While the organization handles 8,500 cases annually, it turns an estimated 10,000 people away.

"They would qualify for our services based on income and they have a case that has legal merit, but we simply don't have the resources... (to) take the case," Ms. Shakarian said.

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