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Legal Aid fund raising taps 500 new donors

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Plain Dealer Reporter

After 100 years of lending a hand to the needy, the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland is reaching out to local law firms for help.

To combat declining state and federal money, Legal Aid organizations nationwide have begun appealing to private firms, foundations and attorneys for donations.

Eleven months into its first fund-raising drive, the nonprofit Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has acquired nearly 500 new donors and netted more than \$810,000 in pledges toward its \$6.1 million operating budget.

"We have a very committed staff, but we can't provide services to all the poor in our community," said Diana Thimmig, president of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and a partner in the Cleveland office of Roetzel & Andress.

Legal Aid, the fifth-oldest organization of its kind in the world, provides free legal help to the more than 300,000 low-income residents in Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake and Lorain counties.

Last year, Legal Aid's 39 lawyers handled more than 8,500 civil cases related to housing, employment, questionable business practices, family law, immigration, community development and special education.

But because of limited resources, "Legal Aid is able to help only the poorest of the poor," said Melanie Shakarian, the agency's first director of development.

"To qualify for services, a family of four cannot have an annual income of more than \$23,000. . . . Even with strict intake guidelines, there are many families who qualify for service but are turned away because Legal Aid does not have the resources to help them."

The money raised so far will help Legal Aid rely less on federal and state financing, hire more lawyers and better compensate those who already work there.

Although lawyers at major firms start at more than \$100,000, Legal Aid attorneys start at \$33,000 per year.

Two-thirds of the pledges have come from law firms and other businesses, 20 percent have come from foundations, and 15 percent are from individual donors, mostly lawyers.

Jones Day has pledged \$155,000 over three years, and Squire, Sanders & Dempsey LLP pledged \$150,000 over three years.

"Both of us hope that next year somebody will give a contribution bigger than both of us," said Ricky Gurbst, a partner at Squire Sanders who once served as civil director for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

While Squire Sanders' gift is unrestricted, Jones Day's contribution will go toward the Jones Day Pro Bono Fellowship at Legal Aid.

Other local firms making multiyear grants include Roetzel & Andress (\$45,000); Ulmer & Berne LLP (\$30,000); McDonald Hopkins Co. LPA (\$30,000); Hahn Loeser + Parks LLP (\$10,000); and Duvin, Cahn & Hutton (\$6,000).

Twenty-three other law firms have promised \$2,000 to \$10,000 in annual gifts.

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