



# THE MORNING JOURNAL

01/07/2007

## Area municipal courts should track Legal Aid services to the indigent

**We hope Judge John Musson follows through on tracking how many indigent people are turned away by Legal Aid of Lorain County and wind up being forced to represent themselves in civil cases in Elyria Municipal Court.**

It's Musson's perception that the number is up.

Most of the cases involve consumer issues or landlord-tenant disputes. Legal Aid handles only civil cases, not criminal. It's tough enough being indigent, let alone having to go up against a landlord or a merchant in court without your own lawyer. That shouldn't happen; Legal Aid is supposed to represent the indigent.

The number of Legal Aid lawyers based in Lorain County has dropped sharply over the past decade or so, after the Legal Aid program here was folded into the Cleveland office of Legal Aid by federal mandate. Only one staff lawyer is left here, and the local director's position is vacant.

But a sizable portion of Elyria court costs still goes to fund Legal Aid. The question has arisen whether Lorain County is getting its money's worth in Legal Aid service for indigent clients anymore.

According to the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's 2005 annual report, revenue increased from \$6.1 million in 2004 to \$6.9 million in 2005.

Lorain County courts provide \$500,000 of that revenue annually, but "clearly that amount is not being used locally," Elyria attorney David A. Myers wrote in a recent letter to the editor.

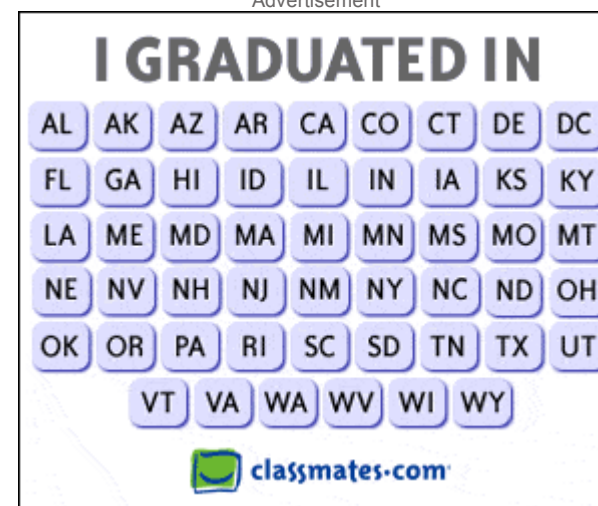
The head of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland said lawyers are sent here from Cleveland to help, and that the organization plans to replace the director in Lorain County and to "eventually" add lawyers. That still sounds like a pretty anemic program, rather than the healthy Legal Aid program that once benefited Lorain County's indigent residents.

Municipal court judges in Oberlin and Lorain said they haven't noticed a problem with indigent people being turned away by Legal Aid.

That's why it is all the more important for Judge Musson and Judge Lisa Locke-Graves to put solid numbers on the situation in Elyria. The area's other municipal courts ought to do the same.


If court fees are flowing to support Legal Aid, then local indigent clients should be getting full benefit of that support.

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