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Story from the Friday, January 26, 2007 Edition of the Chronicle-Telegram

County legal aid branch to get additional help

Joe Medici

The Chronicle-Telegram

ELYRIA — The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland will hire three new attorneys and a paralegal for the Lorain County branch — a number that still leaves it three attorneys short of the number the branch had when it merged in 2000 with the Cleveland office.

“We are going through the hiring process right now, and we expect to have it finished in the next few weeks,” Legal Aid’s Executive Director Colleen Cotter said.

Until then, the office will continue to be staffed by one attorney.

“If three attorneys and a paralegal can adequately meet the needs of our indigent population then that would be a satisfactory solution,” Elyria Municipal Court Judge John Musson said.

“I have to say that the disparity between the past number of attorneys and future numbers gives me some concern as to whether that’s possible, but we will just have to wait and see.”

Musson and Judge Lisa Locke Graves, also from the Elyria Municipal Court, penned a letter in December to Legal Aid asking the organization to look into the shortage of attorneys working at the Lorain County branch.

“Our concern is that for whatever reason, people who normally would be sent to Legal Aid for representation aren’t getting the help they need,” Musson said.

Cotter agreed with Musson’s assessment and said that even if they could afford to put 15 attorneys in the Lorain office, there would still be a shortage for the case load.

“I understand the judges’ concerns, but we aren’t funded to the level of providing assistance to everyone who needs an attorney,” Cotter said. “We have to choose which cases we can handle and which ones we think we can make a difference with.”

Cleveland’s Legal Aid Society is a nonprofit organization that handles civil cases in five counties throughout the Cleveland area.

The society is funded through a combination of state funds and private donations, none of which provide enough to make it easy to lure attorneys, who can make much more in the private sector, Cotter said. The average starting salary for an attorney in Northeast Ohio is \$60,000 — far more than the \$37,500 offered by Legal Aid.

Even if the addition of new lawyers won’t completely remedy the situation, Locke Graves said she was happy to see Legal Aid making the effort to improve.

“I think it would be good for now,” Locke Graves said of the new attorneys. “I can only speak for the last three years since I became a judge, but three attorneys would be a high number. The important thing is that they are trying very much to remedy this.”

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