

Legal Aid VLP: Bringing "Justice For All" To Cleveland Neighborhoods



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Taking one step back can make clear exactly where you're going. That certainly has proved true for The Legal Aid Society's Volunteer Lawyer Program (VLP). Just a few short years ago, Legal Aid looked at its current pro bono model and decided it was time for expansion and innovation. At the same time, David Kutik, the Cleveland Bar Association's president (2004-05), was launching the Our Commitment To Our Community initiative, focusing on engaging private attorneys in pro bono work. Armed with the results of an extensive review conducted by the ABA Center for Pro Bono, Legal Aid's managing attorney of intake and the Volunteer Lawyers Program, Ann McGowan Porath, set out to answer the big question: How can we make our pro bono program better? The obvious follow up question was how do we maximize a collaboration with the Cleveland Bar Association and Our Commitment To Our Community? Based on this collaboration, new models of service were born—along with a phenomenal partnership between the Cleveland Bar Association and Legal Aid.

"Legal Aid has always had a pro bono program," said Porath. "We realized, however, that we needed to reenergize our efforts. Due to funding changes over the years, we had closed down offices and lost our presence in the Cleveland neighborhoods."



Ann McGowan Porath
Legal Aid's Managing Attorney of Intake and Referral

In 2005, Legal Aid, working hand-in-hand with the CBA, rolled out the first of many Brief Advice and Referral Clinics held in flagship locations on the east side and west side of Cleveland: West Side Catholic Center, Martin de Porres Family Center and the Spanish American Committee. The Cleveland Bar Association recruited attorney volunteers. For the VLP's inaugural year, more than 700 attorneys and 130 law students collectively volunteered to assist the poor with legal problems. Together, they served more than 1,500 additional clients.

Year 2006: Into the Neighborhoods

"Last year, we added new locations which has not only made us more accessible, but has allowed us to increase the numbers of individuals we serve," said Howard Strain, Legal Aid's Jones Day pro bono fellow. Strain has been working with Cleveland City Council members to identify and secure appropriate clinic locations. Recently, he received a call from Councilman Zachary Reed, Ward 3, inviting the VLP to the Murtis H. Taylor Center in the Union-Kinsman area. By the end of 2006, 30 clients had their legal needs met at this new location.



Howard Strain
Legal Aid's VLP coordinator

"Soon afterwards, we decided to expand on that idea," said Strain. "We talked with Councilwoman Nina Turner from Ward 1 and were able to hold a clinic in her ward. And, we did the same in Councilman Kevin Kelley's Ward 16 in Old Brooklyn."

"Cleveland is really a city of neighborhoods," said Porath. "Members of one neighborhood are not going to travel to another to get the help they need. So, we've got to bring our clinics to them."

In 2006, more than 575 individuals presenting more than 630 different legal problems were helped through neighborhood clinics. These numbers represent a 40 percent increase in the totals for 2005. The effect on the poor in Cleveland has an even further reach, since the advice provided usually impacts more than the individual. Many times, the problems involve entire families facing eviction, mothers seeking special education services for children, or husbands and wives facing bankruptcy.

With 24 clinics held in 2006, private attorney involvement grew. This growth was due in large part to the Cleveland Bar Association's recruitment of attorneys and the support of the CBA's "Justice for All" committee. Members of private firms, corporate counsel, government attorneys and others discovered that what they receive through volunteerism is often many times greater than what they give. Corporate attorneys, who have little client contact during their day, were able to gain the experience of taking cases to litigation. Staff attorneys from the Court of Common Pleas had the opportunity to be an attorney for a private party—something they would never have time for in their work at the court.

"All the attorneys come away with a different view of the issues facing people in poverty," said Porath. "They find out that there are layers to these problems. The attorneys are able to peel back the layers and help people who have nowhere else to go."



Alida H. Struze
Manager of the VLP's One-on-One Attorney-Client Match Program

"The program [VLP] gives clients a new image of attorneys and goes a long way in spreading good will," added Alida H. Struze, who manages VLP's One-on-One Attorney Client Match program.

One highlight of the 2006 Volunteer Lawyers Program was the CBA's Volunteer Day in the Ward 17 Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood. Legal Aid hosted two brief advice clinics in Ward 17 as part of the Volunteer Day



activities. Plans for 2007 include a similar collaboration for Volunteer Day.

Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program activities are only one area of collaboration with the Cleveland Bar Association. Legal Aid has three teams of attorneys volunteering for the 3R's program, and Legal Aid helped secure funding from the Ohio State Bar Foundation for the constitution booklets used by all 3R's participants.

Year 2007: More Services to More People

VLP's goal for the coming year is to offer 50 brief advice and extended advice clinics in additional neighborhood locations. Again, Cleveland has been named the "poorest city in the nation" so the challenges remain and grow. Certainly VLP's presence in more neighborhoods and increased commitment to serve those clinics with more attorneys and law students will continue to help the poor receive equal justice under the law. However, new partnerships within the community are needed.

Specialty clinics providing focused advice in specific need areas will continue to expand in the coming year. Plans are underway to add new offerings to the already successful immigration and divorce clinics.

Attorneys offer unique skills to fight poverty. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and its team of volunteer lawyers will continue to build on what they do best: promote justice, prevent domestic violence, fight consumer fraud, enforce rights under employment laws, advocate for civil rights, prevent homelessness, protect children and support efforts to bring affordable housing, jobs and services to low-income communities.

Find out how you or your organization can participate in this pro bono effort by contacting The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland at (216) 697-1900, www.lasclev.org. Or, join the Cleveland Bar Association's "Justice for All" committee, which meets monthly.

Legal Aid Recognizes Outstanding Volunteers

On a day traditionally reserved for messages of the heart, Legal Aid said thank you to more than 400 volunteer attorneys. Legal Aid's Volunteer Recognition Breakfast was held on a snowy February 14 at Cleveland's historic Silver Grille restaurant. This year's award winners were:

- John C. Kealy
- Jennifer Peyton
- Dennis A. Rotman
- Teresa G. Stanford

David A. Kutik, who received special recognition for his energetic efforts to promote pro bono service in northeast Ohio.

A heartfelt appreciation was also extended to the members of the Cleveland Bar Association and many law firms that organized volunteer groups to staff the VLP clinics. In 2006, Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyer Program provided legal assistance to an additional 1,500 low-income clients.