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Neighborhood Legal Services strives to meet increased need in downturned economy

By Bryanne Cornell and Erica Mena-Landry

In a harsh economic climate where unemployment, eviction, foreclosure and bankruptcy are becoming a reality for more people every day, the need for free legal services has reached an all time high for low income individuals and families across the commonwealth. Neighborhood Legal Services, founded in 1967, helps to meet that need by providing free civil legal assistance to more than 3,500 households each year in Essex County.

But the economy has taken its toll on their ability to continue doing so. “When the economy goes down, demand for legal services goes up,” said Sheila Casey, executive director of NLS. “More people are experiencing poverty and poverty-related legal issues.” Not only has NLS seen an estimated 40 percent increase in demand for their assistance, but they simultaneously lost 29 percent of their operating budget due to cuts in IOLTA funding. At the end of last year, they downsized from a staff of 33 to a staff of 25.

“We’re trying to streamline, make the functions we perform more and more efficient so we can try to serve as many people as we can as efficiently as possible,” said Casey. “The reality is that these cutbacks do impact clients, because we just can’t answer the phones fast enough.”

NLS provides assistance in five major areas: community economic development, consumer protection, elder law, family law and housing. With programs such as the Housing Court Mediation Project and the Elder Law Project, their staff includes 12 attorneys and four paralegals. NLS relies on volunteers to help take on the large caseload. “I have been a volunteer myself for many years,” said Mark Sampson, who joined the staff six months ago as the housing attorney and runs the Lawyer For A Day program in the housing court. “It’s a very rewarding experience. The folks here are uniformly very giving and caring.”

NLS volunteers include attorneys, paralegals, law students and college students who work as interns in the office. Attorneys who volunteer are provided with training, mentoring and support from the staff. Attorney Linda Hickman began volunteering with NLS in 2005 after relocating with her husband to Boston. She previously worked for her congressman and wanted to get some experience before deciding whether to practice. She made an initial commitment of three days a week, expecting to reevaluate after six months. Four years later, Hickman is still there for three

days a week despite a long commute from Boston and family obligations.

Hickman spoke about her experience in the Elder Law Project working with John Ford: “I landed with someone who could really teach me a lot, and he has. As a volunteer here, you’re really part of a team, doing something that is not peripheral, making a meaningful contribution. It’s an opportunity to work with other lawyers who are really talented, get some real experience and be mentored.”

Volunteers are not expected to spend three days a week at NLS. “From a couple of hours a month, to a couple of hours a week, to taking on a case from start to finish, we try to have enough options for people that there is something for everybody” said Casey. For example, the Pro Se Divorce Clinic meets for one afternoon four times a year. The volunteer attorney who runs the clinic spends a few hours walking clients through various stages of filing a divorce on their own in a clinic setting.

NLS also operates a family law helpline — one of its highest volume services. When a client calls with questions about family law and doesn’t require full legal representation, they are directed to an attorney who can help them answer their questions. Attorneys who volunteer to take these calls are given the caller’s information and may return the call at their convenience, providing a phone consultation and writing up the results of the call for NLS records.

Training is an important part of the volunteer experience with NLS. Volunteers with the Housing Court Mediation Project are given one-day training sessions that include an overview of landlord-tenant law, meeting the judge and learning mediation processes. Volunteers then shadow one of the NLS attorneys for a few sessions and analyze the cases with the staff. Finally, volunteers are shadowed during mediations and provided with feedback and guidance.

“Not only is it a chance for attorneys to become more expert in a particular area of law, and feel good about the work that they’re doing, but it’s a great networking opportunity for lawyers starting or developing their practice in new areas,” said Casey of the training provided.

In light of the current economic situation, NLS provides foreclosure training for local attorneys, including information about auctions, pleadings and finding the information that is already available. “Foreclosure is a new and expanding area of law that we’ve stayed current on. Getting involved in this area gives attorneys a chance to innovate in their practice,” according to Casey.

Volunteers also receive benefits such as discounted prices to Continuing Legal Education courses. “One session a month would make a huge difference in the level of service that we are able to provide for these folks,” said Sampson. “We’re helping people that really have nowhere else to go.”

Hickman reflected on her own experience: “If you’re helping one person at a time, eventually it amounts to a lot of people. Right now, we need all hands on deck.”

To donate to the program or to learn more about Neighborhood Legal Services and its pro bono opportunities, call (781) 599-7730 or visit www.neighborhoodlaw.org.

Rule 6.1 of the Massachusetts Rules of Professional Conduct says: “A lawyer should provide annually at least 25 hours of pro bono publico legal services for the benefit of persons of limited means.”

To guide attorneys in this goal, Lawyers Journal will regularly profile an organization from the Pro Bono Opportunities Guide, a comprehensive listing of statewide agencies that are in need of pro bono assistance from attorneys, law students or paralegals. The guide is available at www.massbar.org/pbog.