

Pro Bono Week events highlight growing need for free legal services

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By Joyce Gannon / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In 2008, the Pro Bono Center at the Allegheny County Bar Foundation recorded 537 calls from individuals who needed legal assistance but couldn't afford to hire an attorney.

By last year, the number of requests had jumped to 748, as people coped with the fallout of an economic recession that left them facing home mortgage foreclosures, tenant eviction notices, unemployment compensation issues, staggering consumer debt and personal bankruptcies.

Though the economy shows signs of recovery, the need for legal help hasn't diminished, said Barbara Griffin, pro bono coordinator for the Bar Foundation's Pro Bono Center, which tries to connect people who need services with lawyers who will handle their cases on a volunteer basis.

From January through last week, the center had logged nearly 800 calls in 2013 -- already surpassing the total requests for all of 2012.

"The problem isn't going away," Ms. Griffin said. "Wages are still low and even though you are working, you may not be making anything extra. If you have an emergency come up or a legal issue come up, there's nothing extra to hire an attorney."

The ongoing need to recruit more attorney volunteers and generate funds for volunteer legal services and programs is the driving force behind Pittsburgh Pro Bono Week, a series of events that kicks off today with a panel featuring several state Supreme Court justices and a federal magistrate judge who will discuss the importance of providing access to the justice system.

It wraps up Friday with a "Jeans for Justice Day" -- a promotion that encourages attorneys and staff at local law firms to dress casually and collect money, donating the proceeds to an upcoming pro bono fundraiser concert featuring bands with lawyer musicians.

"This year, we really ramped it up," Ms. Griffin said. The American Bar Association launched Pro Bono Week nationwide about five years ago, and while the Allegheny County Bar has participated in the past, the critical need for legal services pushed the organization to broaden its efforts and raise more awareness this year, she said.

"We have about 8,500 attorneys in Allegheny County and 6,500 members of the bar association," she said. "When we put together a pro bono project, it's easy to bring in stakeholders such as judges, attorneys, social service agencies and legal aid attorneys. I think we're doing a lot without a lot of resources."

Adding to the volume of calls the Pro Bono Center receives these days are a number of inquiries from people who in the past may have contacted Neighborhood Legal Services Association. That Downtown-based nonprofit has provided free legal help on civil matters for nearly 50 years.

But state and federal government funding cuts over the past two years resulted in a 25 percent drop in the association's budget, and has forced it to reduce staff and services, Robert Racunas, Neighborhood Legal Services Association's executive director, said last month.

"As NLSA has had to cut back and has even closed offices, folks are still experiencing problems and have nowhere else to go, so we try to help them directly or refer them to the appropriate legal service providers," Ms. Griffin said.

To help manage the bump in inquiries, the Pro Bono Center last year hired a second full-time coordinator who, like Ms. Griffin, is also a lawyer.

Of nearly \$262,000 in grants the Bar Foundation awarded last year, \$30,600 went to five legal service organizations for pro bono initiatives. Recipients were the Education Law Center, which provides legal assistance to parents on matters such as special education and access to charter schools; Jewish Family & Children's Service of Pittsburgh to help immigrants with legal issues; Pittsburgh Mercy Health System to provide legal aid for homeless individuals; Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh to assist individuals going through divorce; and NLSA, to assist individuals involved in abusive relationships.

Another collaborative effort that works to provide legal help to individuals and charitable organizations is the Pittsburgh Pro Bono Partnership, which includes law firms, corporate legal departments, the Bar Foundation and NLSA.

As part of Pro Bono Week, the partnership on Wednesday plans a free breakfast meeting at law firm K&L Gates, Downtown, during which it offer information about how to provide free legal services in the face of government funding cuts.

Through the week, the Pro Bono Center is asking all area attorneys to commit to at least one pro bono case in 2014. The call for a "pro bono pledge" will go out to every lawyer in the bar association "and every other one we can find," Ms. Griffin said.

For more information on all Pro Bono Week events, go to www.pittsburghprobono.org.

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