



Acts of Kindness: Groups raise funds to provide legal services for people in poverty



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For the next few months, three legal organizations in Toledo will raise money so they can continue helping people who can't afford an attorney for civil matters.

The Toledo Bar Association Pro Bono Legal Services Program, Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc., and Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc., are looking to raise \$200,000 this year for the Justice For All Campaign.

“We try to do better than last year,” said Bob Tucker, a local attorney and co-chair of the campaign. “We’d love to continue to improve.”

Rather than try to conduct three separate fundraisers, the campaign benefits all three organizations, said Bradley Lagusch, executive director of TBA. It's easier for the organizations and more convenient for donors, who don't have to be asked multiple times to give money to several groups that provide similar services.

Each of the groups provides civil legal needs of people in poverty. Some of the most common issues that attorneys handle involve driver's license reinstatement, divorce, or landlord-tenant disputes. But attorneys represent people in a wide range of civil cases.

"We also do a lot of clinics within different areas of need in the community," Mr. Lagusch said.

In 2019, lawyers assisted with 130 divorce cases and 649 juvenile cases, among others, in TBA clinics. Additionally, 545 clients were assisted in a driver's license clinic and \$235,674 in fines was waived by Ohio BMV or courts to assist clients with reinstating or obtaining their driver's license.

Mr. Tucker said he believes the justice system only works when everyone has access to an attorney. His father was a lawyer in Toledo, and as a child, Mr. Tucker remembers going to ABLE dinners with him and learning the importance of giving legal aid to those who couldn't afford it.

To illustrate the situation, Mr. Tucker said there's a maxim among attorneys, which is the question, "if I needed a lawyer, could I afford myself?"

"And the answer is kind of no," he said. "I certainly have some means, and there are many people who have far less than I do."

Mechelle Zarou, a local attorney and co-chair of the campaign, said while everybody knows they can get a criminal defense attorney for free, many people still don't know that civil legal services for free and reduced costs do exist.



Often, it's difficult for people to even understand that they need a lawyer, Ms. Zarou said. Insurance, for example, is so convoluted that many people don't realize if they're being taken advantage of. Landlord-tenant disputes are common, she said.

The issues that attorneys handle are so varied that it just doesn't always occur to someone that they should talk to a lawyer, she said. That's why organizations like TBA, LAWOW, and ABLE are vital to the community.

"It is so important," she said. "It really is about access."

Donations can be made through the campaign's website:
www.JusticeForAllCampaign.org.