

Free legal clinic will help people with housing and financial problems

Trumbull County residents facing legal problems have a new way to get help.

The Clarence Darrow Court Clinic opens this month at the Trumbull County Bar Association. The clinic, offered by Community Legal Aid, will assist low-income individuals facing foreclosure, eviction and debt or collection issues.

The clinic is offered in partnership with the Trumbull County Bar Association, Trumbull County Court of Common Pleas, Trumbull County Central District Court, Trumbull County Eastern District Court, and the municipal courts of Warren, Newton Falls, Niles and Girard.

Solving a community and a court problem

According to Elsa Reale-Gottfried, the clinic coordinator and attorney at Legal Aid, the project came about as a result of the growing number of people who end up in court with no legal representation.

“A lot of times, people are already in financial trouble, which led to the court case in the first place,” said Reale-Gottfried. “They can’t afford to hire an attorney to help them respond to the lawsuit, which gives the party bringing the lawsuit an unfair advantage.”

Reale-Gottfried explained that without having a lawyer, the person being sued shows up unprepared, or often chooses not to come to their hearing at all. When this happens, the consequences can be serious.

“If you do not go to your court hearing, the court can rule in favor of the party who filed the lawsuit,” explained Reale-Gottfried.

Trumbull County Court of Common Pleas Judge Andrew Logan says that it can be difficult to navigate the legal system without an attorney. But with the opening of the clinic, the judge explained, the courts are giving those without an attorney extra time to get help.

“Short continuances may be granted to self-represented litigants to allow them to access the clinic, obtain legal advice, and perhaps even retain legal counsel,” he explained. “The court is pleased to be a partner in this collaborative effort in order to administer justice in a fair and efficient manner for all who come before the court, with counsel and without counsel.”

The clinic is open to people who qualify for Legal Aid assistance and have a pending foreclosure, eviction, or collection/creditor lawsuit in a Trumbull County court. Reale-Gottfried added that residents with other housing or debt related concerns can also attend, even if they haven’t received a notice of a lawsuit.

“Our hope is to help people find solutions before the court becomes involved,” she explained.

An opportunity to give back

In addition to helping residents solve their legal problems, the Clarence Darrow Court Clinic offers local attorneys a way to give back to the community.

Rachel Nader, managing attorney for Legal Aid’s volunteer program, says that many attorneys see the need and desire to help, but that the region has lacked a structured and convenient way for them to be involved in pro bono service.

“Working together with the Bar Association and local courts, we have designed an approach to pro bono involvement that is convenient, effective, and beneficial to clients, courts and the community as a whole,” Nader shared.

Eligible individuals who attend the clinic will meet with a volunteer attorney who will review their case, offer legal advice and help fill out court forms. Volunteers also may choose to represent a client through court proceedings.

A unique approach

The clinic is supported by a grant opportunity from the Legal Services Corporation, the largest funder of civil legal services in the country. Trumbull County was one of 14 communities nationwide to be awarded this competitive grant opportunity, because of the innovative partnerships between the bar, the courts, and Legal Aid.

Senator Sherrod Brown stressed the benefits this project brings to the community.

“Every Ohioan should have access to the legal services and representation they need during financial hardships,” said Brown. “These funds for Clarence Darrow Court Clinic will help ensure low-income Ohioans have the legal assistance to uphold their rights in cases of evictions, foreclosures and debt collections.”

Nader shared how excited all the partners are for the opportunity to impact the community this way.

“We know first hand how access to legal help can bring hope, clarity, and resolution to someone in crisis,” she said.

The clinic will be held at the Trumbull County Bar Association every Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday from 9:00 a.m. through 12:00 p.m. Individuals who would like to attend are asked to pre-register by calling (855) 847-1662.

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[Print](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

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