

Volunteer advocates, courts help victims of domestic violence

VALU program looking for volunteers

When Susan Smith walked into the courthouse, a sense of terror came over her.

Here she was, ready to go before the court, ready to tell her story, ready to finally say she's had enough.

She was ready to break free from her abuser.

But the emotion, the fear, was too much, and it overwhelmed her. And right when she was starting to think she couldn't do this, she saw a familiar face through the crowd – her volunteer advocate, smiling at her and reassuring her everything was going to work out.

And so she walked forward.

“Susie Smith may not be her real name, but her story is very real,” said Alicia Williamson, a paralegal at Community Legal Aid and coordinator for the Volunteer Advocacy Legal Unit (VALU). “We see Susie Smith every day – women, and sometimes men, who are looking for a way out, but can't navigate the legal system, or need to know that someone's on their side and will sit by them through the process.”

That, Williamson said, is where VALU comes in.

“The VALU volunteers assist survivors as they navigate through the court system seeking domestic violence civil protection orders,” explained Judge Beth Smith. “They serve as advocates for the survivors and may attend hearings in a supportive role. Their presence is helpful to survivors.”

VALU is staffed by volunteers who work with victims of domestic violence to carry them through their legal proceedings. Volunteers receive special training to work with victims.

“At Legal Aid, we are used to working with these vulnerable populations,” Williamson explained. “The training volunteers receive prepare them for working with victims, while also teaching them the ins and outs of the legal proceedings they're going to be helping with.”

Volunteer advocates walk victims through the legal process of filling out their petitions and filing them with the Clerk of Courts. They also accompany victims through their hearings.

“It's important for victims to know that they have someone on their side throughout this process,” Williamson said. “It helps make sure the proper paperwork is filed, but it also gives the victims a self-confidence boost, knowing they have a teammate.”

VALU, which started in 1991, is a cooperative program between the Mahoning County Domestic Relations Court and Legal Aid's Volunteer Legal Services Program (VLSP).

“The Mahoning County Domestic Relations Court has over 700 requests per year for domestic violence civil protection orders,” said Smith. “I recognize domestic violence as one of the most difficult and pervasive social problems of our time.”

VALU currently has seven volunteers managing an average of 40 to 45 cases per month.

“We’re a bit overwhelmed,” Williamson shared. “We are looking for anyone who’s interested in volunteering to contact us. We can answer any questions you may have, or just get you registered for training right away.”

Those interested in the program can call 330-983-2573.

“To say it’s rewarding is an understatement,” Williamson said. “When you help someone get away from a dangerous situation, there’s always a feeling of accomplishment that comes with that. But to see someone go from being terrified to free, from downtrodden to empowered – there are no words for that.”

About VALU

Location: Basement of the Mahoning County Courthouse

Hours: Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Contact: (330) 742-5856 or (330) 742-5857

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