

# Virtual office opens doors to legal aid in Wayne County

## Community collaboration aims to help low-income residents

Wayne County residents are just a video call away from free legal help.

Community Legal Aid, which provides free legal help in several counties, including Wayne, is making it easier than ever to get in touch with an attorney.

Through a partnership with Community Action of Wayne and Medina Counties, Legal Aid has set up a virtual office onsite at Community Action's Wooster location.

This virtual office gives low-income residents the opportunity to apply for help, meet with an attorney, or prepare legal documents with the help of an advocate – all while sitting in a community building right in Wooster.

The project is a pilot, said Steven McGarrity, executive director of Legal Aid. It is a way to meet Wayne County's needs by an organization that's spread thin.

"When our offices merged several years ago, it really left this void in Wayne County," explained McGarrity. "We still have an outreach center in downtown Wooster where we can meet clients, but a lot of people don't even know that's there. And really, it's just not the same as having full-time attorneys working here year-round."

McGarrity shared how a lack of resources has kept the non-profit law firm from being able to adequately staff the counties it serves.

"It's an issue we've been searching for ways to address for years, and not just here," he said. "But what's great about Wayne County is the amazing partnerships and people's willingness to help us bridge that gap. It wouldn't have been possible without Community Action, or other groups like United Way."

United Way has supported Legal Aid for years and was integral in helping the organization find this innovative way to reach clients.

"Because affordable housing is in short supply, many low-income families simply do not have the resources to make ends meet," said Todd Jasin, executive director of United Way of Wayne and Holmes County. "As a valuable partner provider of United Way, Legal Aid's video-based services are an innovative way to meet people's legal needs, including reducing unlawful evictions. We are proud to call Community Legal Aid a partner."

The technology in place at Community Action is easy to use and accessible to all, according to Dawn Spriggs, intake supervisor for Legal Aid.

"It's literally as simple as sitting down and saying a few words to a computer screen," she explained. "We have instructions hanging up in the office that explain to people what to say. Then, you're connected immediately with an intake worker in our office in Akron, and we walk you through the process from there."

Clients using the program will be able to see and hear the Legal Aid staff member through a video device.

“Many times, lack of resources compound challenges for the families we serve,” said Melissa Pearce, executive director of Community Action. “Navigating the legal system can be especially daunting. Access to free legal guidance will assist people in making informed decisions, increase household stability and relieve stress. It’s great to be able to partner with Community Legal Aid in this way.”

Clients will be able to seek advice and legal representation on many legal issues, including housing, family matters, record sealing and expungements, public benefits, federal taxes, bankruptcy, and domestic violence.

“We do have eligibility requirements, so people still will need to apply,” explained Spriggs. “But this is a new way for them to do that, and hopefully, it’s easy and convenient for them. That’s always our goal – to make things as easy and helpful as possible for our clients.”

### **How to apply**

Legal Aid’s Virtual Office

at Community Action Wooster location

905 Pittsburgh Ave., Wooster, OH 44691

8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday-Friday

Anyone can also apply for help anytime online at [www.communitylegalaid.org/apply](http://www.communitylegalaid.org/apply), or by calling Legal Aid’s HelpLine at (800) 998-9454. For HelpLine hours or more information, visit [www.communitylegalaid.org/helpline](http://www.communitylegalaid.org/helpline).

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