

Nearly 10,000 received free legal help last year

Legal Aid releases annual community report

Nearly 10,000 residents in central northeast Ohio received free legal assistance last year.

That is just one of the statistics released as part of Community Legal Aid's 2017 Community Report. The report also shows that the organization saved or obtained for more than \$14.9 million for their clients, and that 95 percent of clients walk away with a better understanding of their rights and knowledge of how to avoid similar legal problems in the future.

But the report isn't just all numbers. The non-profit law firm is hoping community members glean a better understanding of its work through the report.

"As the numbers show, our impact on the community is huge," said Legal Aid Executive Director Steven McGarrity. "And yet, what those numbers don't show are the real lives that are affected by the work we do. That's what we're hoping to share with the community."

One example is veteran Susan Fruscella, a Mahoning County resident who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after suffering rape during her military service. She worked with Legal Aid to get out of a homeless shelter and get her life back on track.

"I used to rely on the food bank," she told the organization during a 2017 interview. "And now, I'm giving money to the food bank. So, it's a big difference."

That transformation is exactly what Legal Aid is all about, said McGarrity.

"When someone comes to us, they're looking for many different things – sealing their criminal records, accessing public benefits, resolving housing issues, discharging unsurmountable debt," he explained. "But what they walk away with is something much less tangible and much more meaningful. They walk away having regained control of their lives, and with the ability to rebuild and even give back to their communities. That's the true transformation, and that's what we're after."

The report, which highlights Legal Aid's 65th anniversary year, showcases how far reaching the organization is, with 420 organizations, foundations, and individuals contributing to the non-profit's success last year. Of those, 184 were volunteer attorneys who took on cases "pro bono" (for free).

"Our volunteers, our donors, our funders, we think of them really as just an extension of our organization," McGarrity explained. "Without them, we simply couldn't do the work that we do."

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