

Grant awards give boost to Stark County housing stability efforts



Canton's whopping 8.34 percent eviction rate places it 33rd among America's mid-size cities with the highest percentages of evictions. Meanwhile, Stark County's 3.68 percent eviction rate equates to 5.03 evictions a day. The sobering statistics, from nationwide database Eviction Lab, maintained by Princeton University, underscores the prevalence of a trend Community Legal Aid intends to reverse.

Legal Aid's newly awarded \$20,000 grant from the Roy D. Moore Memorial Fund at the Stark Community Foundation, a three-year, \$135,000 grant from the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, and a \$25,000 award from the United Way of Greater Stark County are helping the nonprofit law firm step up its efforts to keep Canton residents in their homes.

Helping avoid homelessness

"The service that Community Legal Aid provides directly impacts our community-wide efforts to reduce homelessness," said Joni Close, president of the Sisters of Charity Foundation. "Legal Aid, Stark Housing Network, and the HUD-required Continuum of Care are all necessary elements of Stark County's homeless system."

Bridgette Neisel, vice president of advancement for the Stark Community Foundation, echoed Close's sentiment.

"Thanks to the generosity of the Moore family," she said, "we are able to support organizations that are strengthening and impacting our community like Legal Aid that is working to keep Stark County residents in their homes."

Severe rent burdens occur when a renter household pays more than 30 percent of its income toward rent and is a top predictor of an eviction, according to Maria Heege, president and CEO of United Way of Greater Stark County.

“An eviction record can prevent families from benefiting from public housing and tarnish a lease-holder’s credit rating. It also severely impacts the family’s economic independence,” Heege said. “Our hope is to build a community where families and individuals can have long-term financial stability, so we set the goal of ensuring 70 percent of Stark County residents spend no more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Affordable housing frees up more funds for education, mental and health needs – all of which lessen material hardship.”

John Petit, managing attorney for Legal Aid’s housing and consumer programs, explained that Legal Aid is the last stop in the safety net preventing homelessness. Without the help of an attorney, it’s difficult to fight an eviction.

“These foundations are helping Stark County renters by allowing us to have a full-time attorney dedicated to these issues,” he added.

In the last 10 months of 2018 alone, Legal Aid provided legal support to 172 Stark County residents with housing-related issues.

But the program addresses more than just housing. Petit explained how other legal issues can have downstream effects that impact housing.

“If people are overwhelmed by debt that they can’t pay back, or if they can’t get a decent paying job because of a prior record, that can impact their ability to pay rent,” he said. “Our goal for these families is stability. That’s why we don’t just address the eviction, but also help with [these] other issues.”

Partnering for impact

Legal Aid’s housing project aims not only to represent individual clients in their legal issues, but also to provide counsel to those facing eviction at monthly outreach clinics on these topics.

Once a month, Petit and his team offer a workshop at CommQuest residential and outreach centers. The attorneys give a brief presentation on legal topics related to the mental health and recovery community, offer time for Q&A, and even sit one-on-one with those who have individual questions they’d like to have answered.

It’s a model of embedding legal services into other community organizations, and according to Legal Aid’s Executive Director Steven McGarrity, it’s one that packs a punch.

“We believe wholeheartedly that collaboration is the best way to transform someone’s life,” McGarrity said. “By being one piece in a larger puzzle of supportive services for someone, we can have a much deeper impact in helping them gain or regain stability, and in moving them out of the cycle of generational poverty.”

Funding partnerships are no exception.

“Partnerships like the one we have with Sisters of Charity, Stark Community Foundation, and United Way help us take on more cases, which can help us spot patterns,” Petit explained.

Such patterns may be housing safety or access. Legal Aid’s attorneys go after bad landlords who fail to maintain their properties or fix things when they break, or discriminate against those with physical or mental disabilities or addictions.

Petit draws a quote by Matthew Desmond, author of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, to underscore the significance of having a place to go home to.

“‘Without a home, everything else falls apart.’ The same is true in our county,” he said. “Without housing, everything – jobs, transportation, Section 8 vouchers – falls into chaos. It’s a stability point.”

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