

# Library Law

Attorneys partner with public libraries to reach underserved clients

By Richard Acello

Law Practice

**LIBRARIES HAVE EVOLVED FROM THEIR ORIGINAL FUNCTION** as repositories for books into full-fledged community centers.

So it's not surprising that libraries have also become impromptu law offices where local residents can have access to legal services in a more convenient, less imposing setting than other book-lined sanctuaries.

An informal survey finds roughly a dozen locales from Cleveland to California hosting Law at the Library programs. These are separate from the once-a-year May 1 Law Day sessions, and for many residents Law at the Library is their best chance to interact with an attorney on a wide variety of topics.

Melanie Shakarian, an attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, sees its sessions on one Saturday a month as a way to reach underserved residents. The group serves about 20,000 clients annually.

"Sometimes [visitors] work hours that are different from normal business hours, and we want to make it as easy as possible for our clients to contact us," she explains. "The need is so great. In the five counties that comprise northeast Ohio, more than 30 percent of residents are eligible for legal aid, so we have to be creative about how we can help them."

Generally, the Cleveland Legal Aid Society's sessions include 10 volunteer attorneys, legal aid staff, and law students who conduct an initial interview of the client. Subjects cover a range of issues, including access to health care; domestic relations (child support, divorce, safety for victims of domestic violence); housing (foreclosure, landlord/tenant); economic security; education and employment.

## VARIED ADVICE

Shakarian says this bundle of issues—often referred to as poverty law—has become a specialty unto itself, and that not all of her organization's work is adversarial. Sometimes the volunteer attorneys handle questions on how clients can represent themselves pro se, or how to handle issues that could result in an eviction, rather than

wait until a proceeding is already underway.

"We try to make the legal system more understandable," she says.

In the absence of an attorney, a client's first stab at getting a legal question answered might be with a librarian.

"The partnership with the library has been wonderful because librarians get questions from the public every day, including legal questions, so the librarians wanted our help," Shakarian says. "So we've been able to increase our interaction with the neighborhood through the library, which is a location of trust for people."

Across the country in Benicia, California, attorney Scott Reep of the Gizzi & Reep law firm volunteers with other attorneys at the public library.

"Ours is a once-a-month program on the first Thursday," he says. At the Benicia program, up to 16 residents receive counseling at each session.

"We get a lot of questions regarding dissolution of marriage, foreclosure, dealing with banks," he says. "Questions normally fall within the small-claims arena, vehicle sale and purchase, landlord/tenant, estate planning questions."

"A lot of what we do is provide legal advice, but we give people a game plan to move forward with the issue they're dealing with. We might refer them to a lawyer; other times we might direct them to resources in the library, such as self-help books by Nolo Press."

Why the library? "There are resources such as computer access, it's a free place to meet, and libraries are the original legal self-help centers," Reep says, "because they have the books and reference librarians."

Reep says programs at public libraries may be more accessible than seeking information at county law libraries because they typically have longer hours. But the public uses law libraries too. According to a recent story in the *Columbus Dispatch*, of roughly 15,000 questions fielded by the staff of the Franklin County Law Library in Ohio, about 75 percent came from people representing themselves. ■



Melanie Shakarian: "The need is so great."

# Legal Aid at the Library

Legal Aid partners with the  
Cleveland Public Library to enhance  
understanding of the law.

## Upcoming FREE legal advice clinics:

*All clinics are first come, first served free advice events for  
low-income individuals with civil legal issues (not criminal).*

*Please bring all relevant paperwork with you.*

All clinics are held 9:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

**Saturday, January 10, 2015**

Carnegie West Branch  
1900 Fulton Road

**Saturday, May 9, 2015**

Woodland Branch  
5806 Woodland Avenue

**Saturday, September 12, 2015**

Glenville Branch  
11900 St. Clair Avenue

**Saturday, February 7, 2015**

Fulton Branch  
3545 Fulton Road

**Saturday, June 13, 2015**

Fleet Branch  
7224 Broadway Avenue

**Saturday, October 3, 2015**

Walz Branch  
7910 Detroit Avenue

**Saturday, March 14, 2015**

Hough Branch  
1566 Crawford Road

**Saturday, July 11, 2015**

Langston Hughes Branch  
10200 Superior Avenue

**Saturday, November 14, 2015**

Memorial-Nottingham  
17109 Lake Shore Blvd.

**Saturday, April 18, 2015**

Rice Branch  
11535 Shaker Boulevard

**Saturday, August 8, 2015**

South Brooklyn Branch  
4303 Pearl Road

**Saturday, December 5, 2015**

Harvard-Lee  
16918 Harvard Avenue

*Attorneys are available for brief advice and referral only.*

*Advice clinic attorneys do NOT represent you.*

*If you need legal representation you may be referred to  
The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland or another service provider.*



The  
**Legal Aid Society**  
of Cleveland  
*Since 1905*



CLEVELAND PUBLIC LIBRARY  
[www.cpl.org](http://www.cpl.org)

# Legal Aid's Mission:

To secure justice and resolve fundamental problems for those who are low income and vulnerable by providing high-quality legal services and working for systemic solutions.

## Areas we handle:

### Consumer

foreclosure, home improvement loans  
utilities  
bankruptcy  
loans, contracts, warranties  
garnishments, debt collection, and repossessions

### Family

domestic violence  
children at risk  
some child support

### Housing

evictions  
lockouts  
substandard housing conditions  
access to subsidized housing

### Health & Public Benefits

Ohio Works First (OWF)  
Disability Assistance Program and Medicaid/Medicare  
Prevention, Retention, Contingency (PRC)  
Healthy Start and Food Stamps  
SSI and Social Security benefits

### Education

exclusion from school  
special education  
vocational school and student loans

### Work & Income

unemployment compensation  
wages  
income tax controversies  
removing barriers to work

### Immigration

family petitions  
VAWA and U-Visa petitions  
naturalization  
detention and deportation

**To apply for Legal Aid's help,  
new clients call:**

**888.817.3777 or 216.687.1900**

# Legal Aid at the Library

In 2013, Legal Aid took their outreach to a new level, providing free legal clinics and community legal education sessions at various libraries throughout Northeast Ohio.

It began with the partnership of the Cleveland Public Library, which now hosts one brief advice clinic each month at a local library branch. *Pro bono* attorneys and law students from Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program help staff the legal clinics and bring Legal Aid's services into urban neighborhoods. Community response to this regular presence has been overwhelmingly positive. Legal Aid anticipates helping nearly 1000 clients and family members through this partnership in 2013.

Additionally, Legal Aid staff present "know your rights" sessions at various Cleveland Public Library branches – on topics such as child support and removing barriers to employment.

This summer, Legal Aid and the City of East Cleveland's Public Library together hosted a free legal advice clinic, and Legal Aid increased the volume of outreach brochures circulated through the East Cleveland library system. In addition, a clinic took place at the Madison Public Library that will serve as an anchor for further outreach in Lake County.

This fall, Legal Aid is beginning outreach sessions in the Cuyahoga County Library system via "know your rights" presentations at the Southeast Branch in Bedford. Topics will include sealing a criminal record and identity theft.

**For more information on becoming involved with  
Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program, contact:**

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**For more information on  
Legal Aid's Community Legal Education and Outreach, contact:**

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