

Guest Column: Pro bono legal aid makes real difference

Donated services by hundreds of lawyers in Memphis make "equal justice under the law" a reality for all members of our community.

By Arthur E. Quinn, Special to Viewpoint

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Lawyers are in a unique position to level society's playing field and improve people's lives, yet there is often a wide economic gulf between demand and supply for our services. Rather than blindly accepting this inequity, the legal profession in Memphis has a long tradition of providing free or reduced-fee services on a volunteer (pro bono) basis.

Attorneys often help a friend, a favorite waitress or even an unpopular brother-in-law without expecting payment for their time. The Access to Justice Committee of the extends this helping hand to the people who don't know an attorney able to assist with the problems that life presents, such as a landlord who expects rent for an uninhabitable home or a garnishment for hospital bills that wipes out an already meager paycheck.

Last month, new census figures showed that the metropolitan Memphis area had the highest poverty rate among metro areas in the U.S. with populations of at least 1 million. Of the 1.3 million people in our eight-county metro area, 19.1 percent lived in poverty last year.

While economic development officials, community organizations and social service agencies are prominently engaged in the battle to fight poverty, many may not realize just how important access to legal services is in this battle. In Memphis and Shelby County, hundreds of attorneys provide pro bono services, supplementing the work done by Memphis Area Legal Services (MALS) and the Community Legal Center (CLC).

Because of resource limitations, MALS and CLC are only able to help fewer than 20 percent of those eligible for their services. Without pro bono attorneys stepping up to the plate, even fewer elderly and low-income clients would receive the assistance they need to navigate life's challenges. That's why in 2010, 6,099 attorneys in Tennessee provided almost a half-million hours of documented pro bono service.

Lawyers understand the core concept that we are a "nation of laws" and that our justice system aspires to "equal justice under law." We see every day the

confusion and despair many people experience when the precarious balance of shelter, food and health is threatened by an injury at work, a car wreck or an illness. If there is truly to be "equal justice under law," then all members of our community must have the ability to navigate through the maze that surrounds our justice system.

Pro bono attorneys help clients throughout the year with basic legal issues, such as health, housing, small business problems and inheritance issues. We assist with cases of abuse, fraud and neglect that help keep people on stable ground.

Memphis' legal community also provides clinics where people can get legal advice at no charge. From 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on the second Saturday of each month, a legal clinic at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library assists members of the public on a first-come, first-served basis. And each Thursday, attorneys are available at the Shelby County Courthouse to assist litigants who are representing themselves in General Sessions Court in the afternoon; the Community Legal Center has an attorney at the courthouse in the morning to help litigants representing themselves in divorce cases. Throughout Shelby County, clinics are held at churches, nursing homes, retirement homes and community centers to help residents with advance care plans, health care directives, powers of attorney, wills and other important legal issues.

A terminally ill woman and an elderly gentleman were mistakenly pursued by their credit card companies for debt they did not owe. After they sought help from a legal clinic, a pro bono attorney was able to get the wrongful cases dismissed. An abused wife and her son moved into a protective shelter. The woman was unable to work because of major medical problems. Through litigation and mediation, their pro bono attorney was able to get the husband to agree to support payments while the divorce case was pending; those payments allowed the mother and son to move into an apartment with a more stable environment. A wheelchair-bound woman, who was being evicted from her apartment for complaining that it was infested with bugs and was not handicapped-accessible, sought help to appeal the eviction. A pro bono attorney spent more than 100 hours handling her case, which resulted in a reversal of the eviction.

By helping such people maintain their independence and gain stability in their day-to-day lives, we are not only relieving the burden on social service agencies, but we also are fostering the caring, helping, loving nature of our city that has always made Memphis a special place to live and work.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out that "life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are we doing for others?'" Pro bono work is the legal community's answer to that question. Please join me in extending heartfelt thanks to all of my colleagues who give their time and resources to our neighbors. And, hey, if you know an attorney personally, today is a good day to shake her hand or give him a pat on the back for shouldering a little bit of the burden for someone else.

Arthur E. Quinn is chairman of the Memphis Bar Association's Access to Justice Committee.

For more information about pro bono legal services and volunteer opportunities, visit memphisbar.org.



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