

August 7, 2008

Legal Aid helps the down and out

By John Stevenson: The Herald-Sun

DURHAM – It is common knowledge that Durham and many other counties have public defenders to assist poor criminal defendants.

However, it is less well known that free legal help also is available for low-income people with civil woes, such as victims of identity theft and those with looming house foreclosures, mountains of consumer debt and other wallet-numbing nightmares.

Battered women in need of judicial protection are welcomed.

The door is equally wide open for seniors who can't afford to pay for wills or powers of attorney.

Those are just some of the issues handled by **Legal Aid of North Carolina**.

The program's downtown Main Street office covers not only Durham County, but also Caswell, Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance and Warren counties.

Roughly a dozen employees are a picture of bustling activity as they scurry to assist clients who can't afford to pay.

A sense of urgency is almost tangible.

Nowadays, that apparently is a good thing. According to staff members, the worsening economy is driving desperate men and women to Legal Aid in droves.

"Some of them would be up a creek without us," said **Gina Reyman**, senior managing attorney in the Durham office.

"This summer, we have just been overrun," she added. "I guess it has to do with gas prices and the economy in general. We're overrun with consumer cases and house cases. Lots of evictions. Lots of foreclosures. People are losing their houses right and left."

"All of a sudden, people are really in a pinch," agreed staff member **Willette Crews**. "It's gotten desperately bad."

Legal Aid can negotiate with lenders to help avert foreclosures.

The agency helps about 1,000 clients a year, with some 40 new ones pouring in each week.

One of the beneficiaries is Angela Goode, a 35-year-old mother of two whose job pays \$7 an hour. The property on which her mobile home sits was threatened



Attorney Kari Hamel (right) talks with volunteer interns Patrick Caulfeild (left) and Meredith Flowe at the Legal Aid of North Carolina office in downtown Durham. It offers free legal help for low-income people with civil woes. Staffers say a weak economy has caused its list of clients to skyrocket. (picture by Mark Dolejs/The Herald-Sun)

with foreclosure until Legal Aid saved the day.

"It's heaven-sent," Goode said of the program. "They have taken care of me very, very well. It's a good thing because I don't even get child support. Without Legal Aid, I'd be living out of a minivan with my kids."

To qualify for free legal assistance, people must have incomes below a certain level. For example, the cap for a single person is \$19,500 a year. For a family of four, it is \$39,750.

People who work for Legal Aid aren't getting rich either. The annual starting salary for attorneys is \$39,000.

"Most of us obviously aren't here for the money," said Reyman, a 1987 graduate of law school at the University of North Carolina.

"I don't like to worry about money," Reyman added. "I'd rather make sure people don't go without justice. People don't come up here because they've been bad. They come up here because they've been ripped off. They've got good claims, but not enough money to pursue them. It's very rewarding work."

As if it didn't already have enough to do, Legal Aid is branching out in yet another direction, teaming up with the Duke Children's Law Clinic, Duke Hospital and Lincoln Community Health Clinic to help make sure young people get the medical attention they need.

The new program, said to be one of only about 70 initiatives of its kind nationwide, is called the **Medical-Legal Partnership for Children** in Durham.

If a worthy child is denied Medicaid, Legal Aid attorneys might come to the rescue with an appeal. Or if a landlord refuses to remove health-damaging mold from an apartment, he could find himself face to face with a lawsuit.

Physicians and nurses will attack the same problems from their own perspectives.

"Medical people see a clinical problem," said **Madlyn Morreale**, an attorney working with the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children. "We see a legal problem. With this program, we're trying to blend the two."

jstevenson@heraldsun.com