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Crisis: Attorney helps those hurt by housing woes

By John Hinton | Assistant Metro Editor

Yvette Stackhouse sees many people who are facing foreclosures or evictions in a weak economy, as local residents have lost textile and other manufacturing jobs.

When people come to Legal Aid of North Carolina Inc., they are facing a crisis and need help quickly, Stackhouse said.

"They are facing a deadline," she said. "Whether it is a foreclosure or an eviction, they are in an emergency-crisis mode when they walk in the door."

Stackhouse was recently appointed as the agency's managing attorney for its Winston-Salem office. Her agency provides free legal services to poor people in such civil cases as foreclosures and evictions.

The agency handles cases in Forsyth, Davie, Iredell, Stokes, Surry and Yadkin counties.

More people are facing foreclosures now than six months ago, she said. However, her office, which was then the Legal Aid Society of Northwest North Carolina Inc., noticed the trend of lenders providing subprime home mortgages in 1998.

"Everyone made money, but now these mortgages are coming due at high interest rates," Stackhouse said. "Many people in all income levels cannot afford their mortgage payments."

She has seen the number of foreclosure cases increase from 25 a week to 50 a week. "We have been inundated," she said.

Stackhouse said she was appointed to lead the local office because of her experience.

She worked off and on for Legal Aid for several years, and then became a staff attorney in 2000. In 2004, Stackhouse became a supervising attorney for the public-benefits unit. Stackhouse was first hired as a law clerk for the Legal Aid Society in 1992.

The Legal Aid of North Carolina and the Legal Aid Society of Northwest North Carolina consolidated in July 2007 and moved into the office at Liberty Plaza. The nonprofit groups merged staffs to handle clients with cases involving family violence, landlord-tenant disputes, health care, public benefits and school issues.

Stackhouse received her law degree from the University of Richmond in 1993. She attended the Wake Forest University School of Law as a visiting third-year student in 1992. She got her bachelor's degree from Hampton University in Hampton, Va., in 1980.

Fellow lawyers and friends praise Stackhouse for her leadership and legal skills.

Andrea Kurtz, a former lawyer for the Legal Aid Society, said she has known Stackhouse for eight years.

"I think she is a great attorney, very compassionate and detailed-oriented," said Kurtz, the implementation director of the mayor's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness in Winston-Salem. "She brings a depth of understanding to the problems poor people face in her community."



Yvette Stackhouse is the managing attorney for Legal Aid.

Journal Photo by Bruce Chapman

Legal Aid has 12 staff lawyers, nine paralegals and four law clerks who work in a 7,279-square-foot office on the fourth floor of Liberty Plaza. A group of 20 lawyers works pro bono, meaning that they provide free legal services to the agency's clients.

The agency conducts clinics to help people represent themselves in some situations.

Its clinics deal with such matters as landlord-tenant disputes, Medicaid, inmate re-entry, child custody and divorce. Through those clinics and staff members speaking to local organizations, the public is becoming more aware of Legal Aid's work, Stackhouse said.

She said that those efforts should help her agency raise money. It will conduct its first fundraising campaign this year.

"Five hundred thousand dollars to \$1 million would be a wonderful goal, but we are starting from scratch," she said. "I'm not sure what our goal should be in this community."

Most of the agency's clients appreciate the help they receive, Stackhouse said. Clients send thank-you notes and call to express their appreciation.

"I have seen grown men cry when they know they will get Social Security disability or unemployment benefits," she said.

Janet Ward Black, a Greensboro lawyer and a former president of the N.C. Bar Association, said that Stackhouse has the administrative skills to use her office's "scarce resources to help the most people."

Stackhouse has a good heart "and a willingness to work on behalf of people who cannot afford justice, but have life-threatening situations such as foreclosures," Black said. "They are people in crisis."

Statewide, Legal Aid has 150 lawyers available to represent poor people, but there are nearly 3 million state residents who qualify for its services under federal poverty guidelines. Her agency accepts cases that have valid legal claims.

Legal Aid turns away eight out of every 10 cases because of lack of staff and resources, according to an October 2007 article in *North Carolina Lawyers Weekly*.

"We can always use more money and more attorneys," Stackhouse said. "If I had it my way, I would take more cases, but we don't have the resources. We turn away too many people."

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