



Got Any Real Lawyers There?

“YOU GOT ANY REAL lawyers there?”

“Lorraine” called our legal aid office, Legal Aid Works, searching for a lawyer to help her with a civil protective order petition she had filed against her abusive spouse. Our intake staffers hear that question often, because applicants frequently wonder aloud if a free legal aid office could possibly offer a “real lawyer.”

The Perception

Something that comes without apparent cost might be perceived as not as valuable as something which would normally cost thousands of dollars. If someone offered you a diamond bracelet for free, you would wonder whether those sparklers were genuine or fake. So, it might be logical to assume that legal aid lawyers are not “real” and that our representation is half-way, less than, and not fully authentic. Adding to that general perception is the oft-repeated taunt from abusive spouses that our indigent clients won’t have the money for a “real lawyer.”

The Reality

“Yes,” we tell Lorraine, “we do have real lawyers.” They come in all levels of experience, ranging from just passed the bar to 35-year litigation veterans. They are compassionate and savvy, with just enough dewy-eyed idealism to help them plow through the crushing caseloads they handle.

Cheerleader-in-Chief

One of the best parts of my job as executive director of a legal aid organization is my role as cheerleader, mentor, and sounding board for our extraordinarily dedicated attorneys. It makes my day when one of my colleagues bursts into my office, eager to relate a triumph in court, work through a pressing legal conundrum, or commiserate about the struggles our clients are facing. Our attorneys benefit from a collegial support system not just with other attorneys and dedicated staffers in our three branch offices, but also among the other legal aid attorneys all over the commonwealth. We inspire our newly minted attorneys by making sure they are plugged into that network of gracious, generous colleagues who are always willing to puzzle through an issue, share a template or make a referral to a pertinent resource.

Searching for the Best

How do we choose which attorneys will be the best fit for this extraordinary opportunity that is rewarding in all but the monetary sense? We assess whether candidates have the integrity, grit and creativity that we need to do this demanding work. With compassion as an essential tool in their toolbox, those job candidates are measured for their ability to stow their judgmental attitudes about the indigent at the door. Then we gauge their ability to multi-task effectively. Will they perceive the small and the

big pictures that lie beneath our clients’ legal issues? Do they have the “eye of the tiger” to be a passionate, fearless litigator in what is often a David vs. Goliath mismatch? And, more practically, can we expect them to work hard for the small nonprofit salary we offer, typically \$48,000 for a newly hired attorney? Finally, it helps to have a sense of humor and work/life balance.

A Day in the Life

What is it like on a typical day in the life of a legal aid attorney? In a word, busy. Our nine attorneys (one of whom is part-time) try their best to meet the civil legal needs of 52,000 potentially eligible clients living in a vast, mostly-rural service region which encompasses seventeen counties and 51 county-level courts.

Like an emergency room without enough doctors, we have perfected the unenviable skill of rationing justice through a triage process which winnows out all but the most pressing cases, based on priorities set through community legal needs surveys. Currently, our office prioritizes cases which involve imminent homelessness (evictions and mortgage foreclosures) and domestic violence cases, but we also handle other family law cases, consumer and public benefit cases as well.

Across the country, legal aid offices have to turn away two out of every three eligible applicants simply because we do not have the resources.

In Virginia, there is one private attorney for every 346 Virginians, but from a poor person's perspective, there is only one legal aid attorney for every 7,000 poor Virginians. That justice gap keeps our caseloads large, as we do our best to triage the needs of indigent clients who face life-altering civil legal issues.

Resources

One way we can assist new attorneys who come to us fresh from law school, staggering under a mountain of school debt, is a Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP). With that fund, administered through the Legal Services Corporation of Virginia, our new attorneys can obtain up to \$5,000 per year to assist them in repaying their loans while they are helping our clients find justice.

Another great resource is the Virginia Poverty Law Center, which offers crucial training opportunities and access to mentors who are experts in their respective fields. In addition, we count on a cadre of compassionate, eager pro bono attorneys, interns, and law clerks whose exposure to our brand of equal justice will, we hope, inoculate them against apathy and forbid them from living in blissful ignorance about the justice gap and the compelling need for volunteer attorneys and financial donations to support our work.

Real Lawyers

Yes, Lorraine, we do have real lawyers at Legal Aid Works. They are warriors on the front lines of the justice gap and are worth their weight in gold.

Ann H. Kloeckner, Esq. has been the executive director of Legal Aid Works (www.legalaidworks.org) since 2011 and is licensed in Virginia, Texas, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.

More on pro bono service

Read more about how a Fredericksburg lawyer works with Legal Aid Works to do pro bono on page 42.

Read about how you can get involved in FreeLegalAnswers.org on page 38.



Transform™
The complete, affordable EDGAR filing platform

Why pay more for your SEC filings?

- ▶ EDGAR HTML Composition
- ▶ XBRL and iXBRL Tagging
- ▶ US-GAAP, Mutual Fund, and IFRS filings
- ▶ Self-service and Full-service options
- ▶ 24/7 Technical Support



Contact us for a personalized demonstration:
info@compsciresources.com | 703-584-7178