

Volunteer Lawyers Project seeks help for the poor

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New Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project General Counsel A. La'Verne Edney is going from A to Z in the state bar roll looking for attorneys willing to represent poor people in need of civil legal services.

Since she joined the Volunteer Lawyers Project as general counsel on Sept. 1, Edney has signed up 60 additional lawyers who have agreed to take a case for free. She's gotten through the B's in her alphabetical recruitment. There are more than 6,700 practicing lawyers in Mississippi.

"One of the things I've consistently heard is 'I've never been asked,' " Edney said.

She will be calling.

Edney devotes most of her time to recruiting attorneys willing to handle civil cases for free.

The Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project asks every eligible lawyer to take one case a year for free.

The Volunteer Lawyers Project works with the Mississippi Center for Legal Services and North Mississippi Rural Legal Services. Low income Mississippians whose civil legal needs cannot be met by the two Legal Services entities are referred to the Volunteer Lawyers Project, where staff attempt to match them to private lawyers who are willing to do pro bono work. Volunteer lawyers handle civil cases including divorce, child custody, child support, guardianships, bankruptcy matters and landlord tenant issues, among others.

Edney also is looking for law students, new law school graduates or lawyers who are between jobs and willing to volunteer some time.

"We have attorneys fresh out of law school who have not found jobs yet. I have encouraged them to come and get experience until they get a job. It is beneficial to them to get this experience."

About 20 students from Mississippi College School of Law have donated time. Next spring, University of Mississippi School of Law students are expected to work through an externship program.

The Volunteer Lawyers Project provides forms and practice area manuals which may assist new lawyers or lawyers who come from other practice areas. Thirteen law firms volunteered their time to create the manuals.

Edney is a former partner in the Jackson law firm of Brunini, Grantham, Grower and Hewes, where she worked for 11 ½ years. She has committed to serve for two years as general counsel for the Volunteer Lawyers Project, with an option to return to the Brunini firm. The firm made a financial contribution to help fund the position of general counsel.

Edney said, "I simply want to give back to God a portion of what He has given me. I could not close my eyes to the need. That's the easy way out. I was taught that when God blesses us beyond our needs, it is not so that we can simply live more lavishly, but so that we can bless others."

She has done pro bono work for years through her church and at the law firm. Most recently, she was one of several lawyers who provided free legal representation to people who needed to establish guardianships to be able to enroll children in Jackson and Hinds County schools in August.

Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Jess H. Dickinson said recruiting more volunteer lawyers from the private bar is the most viable solution to filling the gap of unmet needs for civil legal representation of the poor.

"The sad truth is, we simply can't raise enough money to fund Legal Services to the level necessary to provide adequate legal counsel to the poor," said Justice Dickinson, who is the Supreme

Court's liaison to the legal services community. "The only realistic solution to the problem is to provide a well organized, well administrated, adequately funded system of volunteer lawyer representation for the poor, and to recruit a sufficient number of lawyers in Mississippi to handle the cases. The employment of La'Verne Edney as general counsel to MVLP is a huge step in the right direction. "

The Volunteer Lawyers Project currently has 239 cases waiting to be matched to a lawyer.

Between January and September 2009, MVLP received 3,313 cases involving persons in need of legal assistance, closed 3,158 cases, and provided assistance to 8,746 people, according to MVLP Executive Director Shirley Williams. During the entire year 2008, the organization opened 3,326 cases and closed 2,946 cases.

Edney said many lawyers in private practice don't realize the scope of the unmet needs.

"My job is to make them aware of the need, to let them know that there are people who just don't have any resources available to pay an attorney to handle cases for them," Edney said.

"There are many children impacted by parents' inability to afford legal services," she said. For instance, if a struggling divorced parent can't afford to hire a lawyer to pursue unpaid child support from the non-custodial former spouse, children go without basic necessities or medical insurance.

Justice Dickinson said, "When our most vulnerable citizens – including suffering children, the elderly, and the disabled – need and seek justice and fairness from our judicial system, we simply cannot slam the door in their faces because they are poor, and cannot afford an attorney. To do so repudiates everything we stand for as Americans."

For more information, contact Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project Executive Director Shirley Williams at swilliams@mymvlp.net or 601- 960-9577.

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