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As need grows, so does legal clinic

It provides free services to immigrants and anyone at 125% of poverty level.

Some come for counsel regarding a landlord who promised to fix something but failed to do so, or failed to return a refundable deposit.

Others come because they were victims of a scam or job discrimination.

Either way, the Fort Wayne office of Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic (NCLC) is their only option for obtaining legal counsel and representation.

Located in the new Community Resource Center for Refugees, 2826 S. Calhoun St., the clinic is growing and expanding services to meet the legal needs of low-income residents. For the first time, the local office of the Indianapolis-based clinic will have two employees, both through the federally funded Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) program. An attorney also will soon be hired, thanks in part to a \$20,000 grant from the Lutheran Foundation.

The local office is currently staffed eight hours a month by volunteer attorneys, with assistance from the Indianapolis office as needed for immigration cases. About 40 Fort Wayne attorneys are on the clinic list, with five or six volunteering regularly.

"We are committed to providing legal services for anyone who is at or below 125 percent of the (federal) poverty level, not just refugees," said Ndeto Mwose, site coordinator for the Fort Wayne office. The economic situation has compounded the need for free legal services, he said. A larger number of people qualify for help due to the economy, which has driven foreclosure and bankruptcy rates up. In addition, Legal Services of Maumee Valley, which offered free services, closed last year.

Fort Wayne attorney John Barce of Barrett & McNagny said volunteering at the clinic is gratifying. In one case, he helped a Sudanese refugee who wanted to start a nonprofit organization to provide school supplies and clothing for children in the Darfur region of Sudan. His well-intentioned application for nonprofit status generated red flags and 10 pages of questions from the state, because many foreign countries were part of the organization's name.

"They needed someone to help them go through the questions," said Barce, who helped get the paperwork filed for the now-flourishing Darfur Community Development Organization.

"We're also an HUD-certified pre- and post-housing counseling agency," offering guidance on qualifying and related issues, Mwose said.

Immigration is the largest legal practice area for the clinic. In recent years, more than 2,000 refugees, most from Burma, have been resettled here by the State Department. More have

come to Fort Wayne after first arriving in another community. Refugees can apply for permanent residency after one year, but an arrest record or other problems can delay green card approval.

Legal aid is also provided for issues such as predatory lending, child support, wills and disability claims. Volunteer attorney Margaret Falls has assisted with a variety of cases, including guardianship. She is helping one refugee man gain guardianship of a young relative who came with him to this country.

John Hein, an attorney with Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Co., helps with client intakes, determining the type of counsel needed. Some cases involve a car purchase that turns out to be a lemon or assistance obtaining legal documents for someone re-entering the community from the prison system.

The clinic, which is funded through donations and grants, does not take criminal or divorce cases. Tax filing is not done, but tax disputes are handled. The clinic also offers preventive services and education in finances and local and state laws, including domestic and child abuse and safety laws.

“With what we’re doing with preventive education,” Mwose said, “we have a chance to make a lasting impact.”
