



As public funds shrink, legal aid programs increasingly looking to private donations

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As the amount of public money to New Hampshire legal aid programs shrinks, lawyers are increasingly looking towards local businesses and community stakeholders for financial assistance.

The 15th annual N.H. Campaign for Legal Services is kicking off to raise \$350,000 for New Hampshire Legal Assistance as well as the Legal Advice and Referral Center in Concord. The programs provide legal advice and representation to the elderly and low-income people, including victims of domestic violence. Lawyers work for free or at greatly reduced rates.

Each year, “the need is greater and the public dollars are smaller,” said Emily Rice, an attorney with Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer and Nelson and chair of the Campaign for Legal Services.

Legal Assistance offices across the state receive about half of their funding from combined state and federal sources, while the Legal Advice and Referral Center in Concord gets the majority of its money from the federal Legal Services Corporation. The center helps educate people about their legal options and self-representation.

In 2011, Legal Assistance experienced a drop in state funding, which forced the Nashua and Littleton offices to close. The organization still has five branch offices in Berlin, Claremont, Concord, Manchester and Portsmouth.

“For us it’s a labor of love,” Rice said, adding, “we could work full time in order to do this because the need is so great.”

The organization helps people like 96-year-old Eleanor Knee of Concord. Last year, Knee got into a dispute with the city of Concord over a tax exemption she tried to claim when her husband, Robert, died.

After Robert passed away, Eleanor tried to change her taxpayer status to single, but that became difficult when her husband’s income was included from the prior year.

“She didn’t qualify,” said son-in-law George West. “That meant she would have had to come up with over \$3,500 in taxes.”

Knee couldn’t afford that, but city officials pushed back when she tried to file for her exemption. It got to the point where she was facing the possibility of having to leave the house where she had lived for the past six decades, West said.

“It was very stressful,” he said. “She just worried and worried.”

Her family rallied around her, and West, who teaches business law, tried to figure out the legalese of the city's position. Eventually, they reached out to Legal Assistance and were paired with attorney Elliot Berry, who was able to get Knee's tax exemption approved by a judge.

"He did a tremendous job," West said. "It may not have happened without N.H. Legal Aid. We're extremely grateful for what they did."

Now, he says, his mother-in-law is still living in her Concord home and doing very well.

"I'll tell you, when we got that letter on the appealed decision, she was very relieved," West said. "She just felt so relieved and happy that she was able to remain in a home she's had over 60 years."

Officials estimate Legal Assistance and the Legal Advice and Referral Center helped about 13,000 people in the state last year.

Rice and other lawyers say the services they provide have significant economic impact for the state: a total of \$84.4 million for the economy over 10 years. That effect is calculated through child and spousal support payments, as well as the amount of money clients are able to save on legal fees and spend on rent, groceries and utilities.

"There is nothing I've done that is more satisfying than bringing safety and security to something like this," said participating attorney Gordon MacDonald of Nixon Peabody.

Their message to businesses is that issues such as domestic abuse have a direct effect on the productivity of employees who may be experiencing it.

"If you can alleviate one problem or two problems or three problems . . . if you were to hear the stories of these people, it's very daunting, it's very humbling," Rice said.

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