Consequences of Doing Without
by James M. Daniels, Director

What will it be like, if legal aid disappears?

Who will they call? The elderly veteran in Belpre living on SSI threatened with jail by an out-of-state debt collector harassing him about a debt they claim his deceased wife owed. The single mom in Caldwell afraid to go to work because her landlord is threatening to lock her family out and dispose of her possessions. The unemployed worker in Malta whose rent is due while his unemployment benefits have been screwed up by some faceless bureaucracy far away in Columbus.

The most valuable service provided by attorneys is not the dramatized courtroom work shown on television. It is answering questions, calming fears, or helping keep molehills from growing into mountains. It is advising scared and upset people what not to do as much as what best to do. It is preventive; it is keeping people out of court, more than getting them in.

This is the fourth SEOLS briefly. Each one has focused on the good work of one of SEOLS’s nine offices—work in the courts and in the community that saved homes, built medical/legal collaborations, and set up free tax and legal clinics. This issue and article focus on the SEOLS Marietta office which—in addition to its legal work for thousands of clients, like Mr. Latham—has helped establish free dental and medical clinics in Washington County.

In addition to their work in the courts and communities, what they all do, and none better than SEOLS’ Marietta staff, is keep people out of court, make a few calls to untangle bureaucratic snafus, and resolve disputes and misunderstandings. Each of the above individuals’ problems, if no attorney was available to call, could easily snowball into damages, litigation, and, possibly, knock down already teetering low-income homes. Senior citizens, out of fear of being arrested, will pay a debt collector they do not owe rather than use the money for a necessary expense—like food or their prescription medication—and their health suffers. The single mom may lose her job and the police may get called if an attorney is not available to call her landlord and persuade him not to carry out his threats and explore a possible resolution. The (article continued on page 3)
Volunteer Opportunity Gives Life to Free Legal Clinic

Originally from Marietta, Rhonda received her undergraduate degree from The Ohio State University and her law degree from Capital University. She is currently Trust Counsel and Vice President with United Bank in Parkersburg, West Virginia, and advises trust officers on trust-related issues.

Right after law school, Rhonda volunteered at the Interfaith Legal Clinic operated by the Columbus Bar Association. She met SEOLS Marietta managing attorney Robin Bozian at a training for the Columbus legal clinic. They talked about volunteer opportunities in Marietta and about setting up a legal clinic in Marietta.

Rhonda moved back to Marietta, and worked with Robin and the Washington County Bar Association to create the Washington County Bar Association Legal Clinic. That was in 2004, and Rhonda has been a clinic volunteer ever since. The clinic operates monthly and more than 20 people come in for legal help each month. Most issues are domestic, but clients need advice on other issues as well. Sometimes they’ve received a notice that needs to be interpreted or need help with forms, and for some who don’t read, the clinic volunteers read the documents, help the clients understand what they mean and guide them in steps to resolve the issues.

Rhonda Mears

Rhonda said she enjoys volunteering at the clinic because, “I learn a lot about areas of the law that I don’t normally have the opportunity to practice. I’m always amazed at how willing people are to help themselves. Many times they just need someone to talk through issues with and help them get to a solution.”

For more information about becoming a volunteer with SEOLS Marietta, contact SEOLS pro bono coordinator Melissa Skilliter at mskilliter@oslsa.org.

National Celebration of Pro Bono: October 20-26, 2013

Over the past four years, with your help, the ABA’s Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service has succeeded in creating an annual national spotlight on pro bono.

Our collective efforts are helping to increase access to justice for all.

Do Good. Do Justice. Do Pro Bono.

The National Celebration of Pro Bono is sponsored by the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service.

CLE for Volunteer Pro Bono Attorneys from The Legal Aid Society of Columbus

In celebration and as a thank-you to all of its many volunteer pro bono attorneys, The Legal Aid Society of Columbus is offering many CLEs during the month for you to gain CLE credit at no charge. Attorneys volunteering pro bono with Southeastern Ohio Legal Services may register and participate in these CLEs, also, at no charge.

To find out more details about each upcoming CLE, visit here. To register for an upcoming CLE, contact cle@columbuslegalaid.org.
Ask an Attorney • Upcoming Open Clinics:

Adams County – seniors age 60 and over only – 1 pm–4 pm
must call 800-837-2508 for appointment
11/26 Adams County Senior Center, West Union

Adams County – 11 am
10/16, 11/20  Adams County DHS, West Union

Belmont County – sign up at 5:30 pm/clinic at 6 pm-8 pm
11/13, 1/8/14 Webster Hall, Martins Ferry

Fairfield County – 5 pm-7 pm
4th Tuesday each month but December, The Rising House,
Lancaster

Gallia County – seniors age 60 and over only – appointments
recommended but not required: 740-446-7000
11/21 Gallia County Senior Center

Hocking County – 5:30 pm-7:30 pm, 888-835-5902
2nd Tuesday of November, Trinity United Methodist Church,
Logan

Knox County – sign-in at 5:30 pm
10/21 Mulberry Street United Methodist Church, Mount Vernon

Lawrence County – seniors age 60 and over only – 9 am-noon
must call 800-837-2508 for appointment
11/19 Lawrence County Senior Center, Ironton

Licking County – sign-in at 5 pm
10/16 Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Granville
11/20 Hebron Christian Church
12/18 First Presbyterian Church, Newark

Meigs County – divorce clinic – 2 pm, 800-686-3669
11/14 Meigs County Public Library, Pomeroy

Morgan County – 2 pm–4 pm
First & Third Tuesday every month, Community Action, Malta

Muskingum County – sign up at 5 pm/clinic at 6 pm-8 pm,
800-686-3671
Second Thursday each month but December, Domestic Relations
Court, Zanesville

Perry County – 4 pm, 800-686-3671
First Tuesday each month, Perry County Courthouse, New
Lexington

Scioto County – pro se clinic – 4:30 pm–5:30 pm
10/29, 11/20, 12/16 Portsmouth Public Library

Scioto County – seniors age 60 and over only – 1 pm–4 pm
must call 800-837-2508 for appointment
10/15, 12/17 Scioto County Senior Center, Portsmouth

Tuscarawas County – 5 pm registration/clinic at 6 pm-8 pm,
10/8 Emanuel Lutheran Church, New Philadelphia

Vinton County – seniors age 60 and over only
10/24, 12/19 Vinton County Senior Center

Washington County – 6–8 pm
Third Wednesday of every month except December, St Luke’s
Episcopal Church, Marietta

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Help Available More than Once

John Latham has lived in Marietta for about 20 years. In 2009, he and his wife were having some problems and decided to get a divorce. Mr. Latham could not afford an attorney but knew he needed legal advice. He has two children and he wanted to explore the possibility of getting custody of his two sons.

Mr. Latham turned to the SEOLS Marietta office for help with the divorce and the child custody issues. He got the help he needed, and was awarded custody of the children. About six months later, Mr. Latham’s ex-wife tried to get custody back. Again, he turned to the Marietta office for assistance. He retained custody and his children—who are 18 and 16—still live with him.

In conversation with Mr. Latham about the attorneys in the Marietta office, he said, “They always help me out. I recommend them to others who need help. They helped when I had some financial trouble and after my mother died. I can rely on them for good advice.”

People We Serve

Southeastern Ohio Legal Services® is a division of the Ohio State Legal Services Association®

Unemployed worker can get caught up in protracted administrative proceedings without income and his family facing homelessness if an attorney is not available to make a few calls to the right person in the right agency.

The question of what will happen if legal aid disappears is a real one. Due to our Great Recession, the number of poor people the Marietta office was funded to serve increased by over 72% between 2008 and 2013, while a dramatic reduction in state and federal funding resulted in a 60% cut in the office legal staff. Now, there are only two attorneys and funding cuts continue. In the twelve months prior to September 1, 2013, the Marietta office helped the poor of Washington, Monroe, Morgan and Noble Counties with over 1,000 legal problems. Approximately 90% of that help was advice or a phone call made, a document prepared, or a letter sent for people not knowing what to do or how best to deal with their problems. If legal aid disappears, these legal problems do not disappear. Like unattended problems, they grow more expensive and difficult to fix. Not just for the poor and their families but for their communities, hospitals, law enforcement, and the courts.
Profile: Robert Henry, Staff Attorney

When people first meet Marietta staff attorney Rob Henry, they are often surprised to learn he is a lawyer. Easygoing, reserved, introspective—not the typical attributes of courtroom litigators we envision or see nightly on television.

Rob is sympathetic to that reaction, though, because he never dreamed of being a lawyer. In fact, as a self-described science nerd growing up, that was the last thing he thought about becoming.

“I remember everything being very competitive as a kid. Life revolved around sports, school and getting a scholarship to a good college. That was it, and I was really good at math and science so I always assumed I’d be a doctor or engineer.”

“I grew up in a very modest, traditional household and a very isolated environment. I was told what to do and I did it. I was told what to think and I thought it. Curiosity and learning were encouraged, but I wasn’t exposed to much that challenged that safe, suburban worldview.”

That all changed when he left home. He enrolled at Ohio State and quickly dropped out of the honors engineering program for which he had a scholarship. “Suddenly I was free to do and think what I wanted, and there was no turning back. Very quickly I became frustrated with introductory classes and I didn’t feel like I was learning anything. Eventually I became an English major and decided to learn from books and interesting people instead. Then 9/11 happened, and though it’s a cliché, it really did change everything for me. I radicalized, began seeing the world differently from the bottom-up, and wanted to be a part of shaping the world for the better, instead of just skating by as an observer. I just didn’t know how or in what way.”

Rob spent a year after college working odd jobs and decided to try law school on a whim. “I was completely lost at law school most of the time and didn’t fit in at all. I was surrounded by serious students wanting desperately to be professionals, and who were making plans for their legal careers. I enjoyed learning and arguing, but I was not as certain as many of my classmates about how I was going to use the knowledge and experience I was gaining.”

With that attitude, Rob found himself in politics after law school. He worked on campaigns and as an aide for a city councilman. “It was there that I encountered the attorneys doing work that I could identify with—legal aid attorneys advocating housing issues in front of council. I was extremely impressed and from then on decided I wanted to be one, too.”

In 2008, Rob joined SEOLS and moved across the state to work in Marietta, serving four rural counties.

“I remember my first case vividly. It was a custody case I acquired from another attorney who had just left the program. I took over just as the case was going to trial, within my first month at SEOLS, and without any courtroom experience. My client was a recovering addict defending custody from a paternal grandparent and the facts were not the best. Fortunately, Charles Cohara from our Athens office attended with me and sat by giving sage advice as I did my best Matlock impression. After an eight-hour hearing, we won, and not only did I experience an overwhelming sense of fulfillment in helping to keep a family together, I got a great example from Charles going forward of how collegial and helpful the entire SEOLS program is. It felt like we really were one big team taking on the challenges and injustices of poverty.”

As a SEOLS attorney, he feels fortunate to practice in all areas of poverty law. In addition to taking on landlord/tenant cases, protecting consumers from debt collectors and helping homeowners keep their homes, for the past two years Rob has been the Violence Against Women Act project attorney for Meigs and Gallia Counties, assisting victims of domestic violence, stalking and sexual assault.

“I’ve been here over five years now, but I still feel really new and I like it like that. I’m most proud of taking as many cases as I can, helping as many people as I can, and learning as much as I can every day. I’m no Matlock yet, but someday I hope to be worthy of a light blue suit.”
Yes! I want to help SEOLS advocate for equal access to justice and human dignity.

The hourly cost of placing and supporting an attorney in one of our offices is about $120 per hour. More people need our services than ever before.

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