

Law clinic helps homeless with civil situations

By Katie Pohlman

Posted May 22, 2017 at 5:47 PM

Volunteers with legal backgrounds help navigate complicated system

Condonation, tort, writ of summons, affidavit, pendente lite, subpoena duces tecum; these terms can be hard to understand without a law degree to your name.

Hiring a law degree-carrying person to help you understand them can also be hard, maybe impossible, if you are a person who is homeless.

When Neil Gering's wife filed for divorce, he knew he could not afford to hire an attorney. So, instead, he turned to former Judge Ray McNeal and Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida. He visited the agency's office at 1610 SE 36th Ave. in Ocala as well as its table at Ocala First United Methodist Church's Tuesday Morning Ministry for the homeless.

Legal services - with a staff of 90 attorneys, advocates and support staff - provides free legal aid to more than 17,500 people a year whose income does not exceed 125 percent of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines. The service operates in 12 counties: Brevard, Citrus, Flagler, Hernando, Lake, Marion, Orange, Osceola, Putnam, Seminole, Sumter and Volusia.

"We're like a coach," McNeal said.

He said most of the people he meets, like Gering, will end up representing themselves in court. He and the other volunteers are there to guide them through the process, McNeal said.

Gering visited McNeal whenever a new filing was entered in his case or to ensure he filled out a form correctly. "I think it's a really good deal," Gering said. "(People) can come up here and see a judge."

The agency having a table at First United Methodist's Family Life Center, at 1126 E. Silver Springs Blvd., on Tuesdays, was an experiment that began back in July 2016. McNeal was already volunteering at legal services and the church's homeless ministry, which includes opportunities for attendees to sign up for bicycles, eye glasses, cellphones, clothes and anything else a person who is homeless might need, as well as a warm meal. He wanted to bring the two causes together.

He, along with Iris Castro, a pro bono assistant at legal services, and local attorney Craig Cannon, spend Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to noon answering questions, helping translate legal jargon and simply helping others.

"Ours is a helping, therapeutic profession," McNeal said of law.

The trio sees cases from divorces and guardianship issues to landlord-tenant issues to the preparing of wills. If they cannot help a person, McNeal will refer clients to attorneys he knows in the city.

Sometimes clients just need advice, Cannon said, so he will sit and talk with them. Others need help with research and paperwork. In those cases, he makes arrangements to meet the person the following week.

"We don't come (to the church) with a fully staffed office," Cannon said.

Cannon, of the Cannon Law Firm, who also has his own caseload to deal with, said he spends about four hours on average a week working on cases for people he meets at the Tuesday morning ministry.

There are several other lawyers in the area who have told McNeal they are more than willing to work on cases that present themselves.



After hearing the basics of a client's issue, Castro performs an intake interview to determine whether the client is qualified for the organization's services. Some interviews can take up to one hour.

"You have to have a lot of patience," Castro said. Further issues – logistical or legal – can arise during intake interviews.

One client, for instance, needed help handling a dispute over his recently deceased mother's belongings because she did not leave a will. Castro found out during the intake interview that the issue occurred in Citrus County. She told the client to expect a call from Legal Services to help him find an attorney in that county.

But communication with people who are homeless isn't always the easiest thing. The man didn't have a cellphone or transportation. Castro, McNeal and the man tried to figure out another way for him to get in touch with Legal Services.

Intake interviews, though, are not necessary in every case.

"Sometimes people just talk about stuff," Cannon said. "They need somebody to talk to."

Issues can stem from all aspects of a person's life. People who are homeless often suffer from lack of resources, family support and money, Cannon said. But other problems, such as mental illness or personal relationships, can be a factor as well.

"The most unique problem, and the most exciting part of working with them, is that they're all unique," Cannon said. "No one-size-fits-all, they have unique situations."

The Public Policy Institute of Marion County is focusing on this uniqueness in its 2017 study. The goal of the study is to create a comprehensive, coordinated look at homelessness in the county and what services are available to people who are homeless. Information collected during the study will be used to make recommendations on how to positively impact the county's homeless population.

Meanwhile, McNeal is toying with the idea of taking his legal clinic on the road. The details still have to be worked out.

Legal Services also can help clients with consumer law, elder advocacy, domestic violence issues, housing and more. To learn more about the organization's services, visit www.clsmf.org. Those who need legal help can call the helpline at 1-800-405-1417.

Contact Katie Pohlman at 867-4065, katie.pohlman@starbanner.com or [@katie_pohlman](https://twitter.com/katie_pohlman).