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## Pro Bono Without The Heavy Lifting

Clinics allow lawyers to give back to the community at their own pace

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN



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Eric S. Goldstein, an associate in the Hartford office of Shipman & Goodwin, is among the lawyers who participate in the security deposit clinic, which the firm sponsors through the Greater Hartford Legal Aid Foundation. The program is designed to empower *pro se* litigants in their attempts to recover security deposits while also introducing lawyers to *pro bono* opportunities that don't require courtroom appearances.

As a second-year litigator at Shipman & Goodwin in Hartford, Lela M. Ames is still carving out her niche and proving herself to her colleagues. Being a young associate at a large firm doesn't always afford the opportunity to see the direct impact of one's work in a particular case.

That's why Ames is so drawn to a *pro bono* program sponsored by the firm and operated through the Greater Hartford Legal Aid Foundation.

One night a month, she and a handful of other Shipman & Goodwin lawyers convene at GHLA headquarters in Hartford's North End to assist low-income residents in landlord-tenant disputes over security deposits. Most of the people come in with stories of being wronged by unscrupulous landlords and seek counsel from volunteer lawyers on how they can get back their deposits, which are often several hundred dollars.

For Ames, the one-on-one counseling she provides comes with a different sense of satisfaction she doesn't often get at her day job. Her advice can make an immediate difference in people's lives.

The tenants seeking assistance are required to sign a waiver stating that they understand the extent of the legal services doesn't include actual courtroom representation. "It's a good opportunity to do *pro bono* work without going to court," Ames said.

John Bozzi, *pro bono* coordinator for Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut (SLSCT), arranges the training sessions that prepare lawyers to take part in the monthly

clinics. The Hartford program was created a year ago. A similar effort in New Haven, which is not sponsored by any law firm, began about six months ago. Bozzi said, if enough interested lawyers come forward, another clinic may open in Waterbury or Bridgeport.

In the springtime, Bozzi also coordinates clinics to assist people who are threatened with having their electricity cut off due to unpaid utility bills.

One of Bozzi's goals is to present lawyers with different opportunities in the *pro bono* realm. "These are lawyers who may not be able to do direct representation on their own," Bozzi said, "but they come by once a month and give the appropriate level of legal service."

### **Empowered Clients**

A 1-800 number is provided through GHLA, SLSCT and the New Haven Legal Assistance Association. When a person calls SLSCT, an on-site lawyer screens the case to determine whether it's appropriate for one of the clinics. If it is, SLSCT calls back the person and invites them to one of the monthly sessions.

"We're here to encourage them and advise them," said Madison solo Peter K. Manko, who participated in the clinic at Yale in late November. Manko, a native of Madison, has long been involved in community work, he said, including local politics. The security deposit clinic provided another outlet for him.

Like other lawyers in the programs, Manko spends one evening a month sitting with people and either showing them how to fill out the paperwork for small claims court or filling it out for them. About three clients appear for each clinic in Hartford and New Haven, and

lawyers generally spend about two hours of their evening providing assistance.

Bozzi noted that about five out of those six clients per month end up winning back their deposits in court, a percentage about which "we are very pleased," Bozzi said.

For Tammy Mohler-Avery, the clinics offer her opportunities not available in her current job as a vice president and trust officer for Bank of America. "I can't go to court, but I still want to do something," said Mohler-Avery, who practiced for 10 years at Day, Berry & Howard's New Haven office before recently joining B of A. "[Clients] are looking for reassurance that they have rights."

Mohler-Avery said one of the most gratifying moments in the process is empowering a person who previously didn't know where to turn for help and to "look in their eyes and know they're reassured" that they can succeed in court.

The Young Lawyers Section of the Connecticut Bar Association also has become involved in the security deposit clinics as part of their Public Services Series, recently reinvigorated by 2007 YLS chairwoman Jessica A. Ballou, of LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae's Hartford office.

"A lot of lawyers are interested in giving back and they don't know what opportunities are out there," Ballou said.

This year, Ballou appointed Jonathan S. Weiner as public service and *pro bono* director.

"It's not hard to convince lawyers [*pro bono* work] is worthwhile," said Weiner, who clerks for Supreme Court Justice Flemming L. Norcott Jr. "I think people have some misconceptions of how difficult it is." ■