

# McDonald Hopkins Leads Innovative Pro Bono Program



McDonald Hopkins LLC is the lead law firm on an innovative *pro bono* program developed in conjunction with The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court. The Juvenile Court *Pro se* Clinic was created when McDonald Hopkins lawyers Anne Owings Ford and Jeff Pollock met with Ann McGowan Porath of Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program to describe their firm's interest in helping to meet unaddressed legal needs in the community. The first Clinic was hosted by McDonald Hopkins at Legal Aid in July 2010.

"We wanted to take our firm's commitment to *pro bono* legal service to a new level, and we were looking for a population that wasn't being served by the numerous clinics and programs already offered by Legal Aid," explains Ford. "When Ann Porath started talking about *pro se* litigants in Juvenile Court, we realized we might have a match."

In overwhelming numbers, low income people need help with the child support issues they face in Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court. *Pro se* litigants, or persons proceeding on their own without legal counsel, make up a substantial portion of the people appearing in Juvenile Court. Most of those proceeding *pro se* find understanding and completing the necessary forms nearly impossible.

The most problematic issues for *pro se* litigants in Juvenile Court, hands down, relate to child support. Whether an issue of modifying an existing support order, obtaining back support now that current support was being paid, or

registering an administrative order of support from the Child Support Enforcement Agency (CSEA) with the Court, people have found it difficult to properly present their problems to the Court – until now.

Ford, Pollock, Porath, Judge Sweeney and others from Juvenile Court, as well as attorney Steve Wolkin, met several times from April through July, identifying the area of greatest need and the most effective way for volunteer attorneys to arm *pro se* litigants to go into court on their own.

"Our goal was never to establish long-term representations. Instead, we were looking to provide one-time intensive counseling, so folks could understand how to present their issues to the Court and then follow through," Ford says.

At the first Clinic in July, Judge Sweeney stated: "This is about access to justice. Taking these people from an illegible hand-written document to a properly-presented pleading can move their issues onto the judge's desk."

For the families who need help, they participate in an eligibility screening scheduling by Legal Aid. Volunteer attorneys at McDonald Hopkins then meet with the clients at a Clinic to help people to properly complete necessary forms, as well as advise them on proceeding *pro se* in Juvenile Court.

Training for the McDonald Hopkins volunteer attorneys includes: an overview of the Clinic; Juvenile Court jurisdiction; Child Support Enforcement Agency issues; and an overview of law, procedures and forms involved in specific child support matters. Training further will provide volunteer attorneys with a step-by-step guide to helping *pro se* litigants go forward on their own.

Electing to start slow, "so we could iron out any kinks," explains Porath, the first

Clinic in July involved five attorney volunteers and eight persons seeking advice. Judge Sweeney, working with Lynne Chavers of the Juvenile Court and Legal Aid staff attorneys, worked in the background to provide broad-brush advice to the volunteer attorneys, who worked directly with the litigants, one-on-one, some for as long as two hours.

In one instance, a young father, recently released from jail, was seeking advice on how to modify the child support amount assigned to him by the Child Support Enforcement Agency. He had had a well-paying job before going to jail, but had lost it and was unemployed. He was following up on three job leads, but had no present income and a child support obligation of several hundred dollars per month. Hoping to properly support his child, but frightened by the obligation imposed on him by CSEA, the man turned to Legal Aid for help. The new dad had seen his six-month-old child only twice, but was so proud of the baby that he spontaneously pulled out his cell phone and displayed photos to the attorney working with him. After spending two hours with a lawyer and armed with appropriately-formatted documents, he now can take his situation to court and be heard.

Since the initial Clinic in July, more have been scheduled and McDonald Hopkins will continue this project to help meet the huge need of families in Juvenile Court. To sign-up your firm for a similar specialty clinic – contact the Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program at [probono@laslev.org](mailto:probono@laslev.org) or 216-861-5889.

