

The Legal Referral Service of Jewish Family Service: LOW PROFILE/HIGH IMPACT

By Mark Jacobs
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Despite funding challenges, a shaky economy, and a pandemic that has overhauled the practice of law, Southeast Michigan continues to have a number of places that provide eligible clients with pro bono legal services. Each place is staffed with dedicated personnel who each week assist people in dire need of legal services, often on an emergency basis.

Some places are more well-known than others. One such place that has been slightly (and deliberately) under the radar is the Legal Referral Service of Jewish Family Service (JFS) in West Bloomfield. The program has been in existence for 13 years and has been thriving ever since. It has now served more than 1,000 clients and provided millions of dollars in free legal services, primarily in the areas of family law, bankruptcy, landlord-tenant, probate, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and immigration. Almost three-quarters of the clients are women, often with small children; some are in an abusive relationship and in desperate need of quality legal services.

Jewish Family Service, the parent organization of the legal program, has been serving the community for 92 years. It serves clients of all backgrounds and faiths with a host of vital services centering on older adults, mental health and wellness, and safety net provisions. Specific services include case management, transportation, youth counseling and school-based aid, basic needs assistance, and health care navigation, among others.

When the Legal Referral Service was conceived 13 years ago, it established a simple yet untested concept upon which the entire program was premised: that enough lawyers would agree to handle one “matter” per year,

and that “matter” would be anything from answering a question to writing a letter, attending a meeting and/or formally filing an appearance, or instituting a new case. The discretion would be left strictly to the lawyer, but if they would agree to do one of those things, they’d satisfy their annual obligation to the program.

The response was overwhelming. It didn’t take long for hundreds of lawyers to raise their hands and agree to help, and many insisted that they’d take on multiple cases in a particular year. Soon, many midsize and larger firms joined in, which resulted in the managers of the program half-jokingly boasting that the program now had hundreds of lawyers and was thus the “largest virtual law firm in Michigan.”

The program is fortunate to include many top-notch attorneys in their respective fields of specialty. It is not uncommon to hear a story of a plaintiff’s attorney in a divorce case being shocked to hear that their client’s spouse is now represented by a highly respected big-name attorney provided by the Legal Referral Service program of JFS.

All clients are prescreened and meet the income guidelines for pro bono assistance set by the State Bar of Michigan. Once a

case is accepted, the internal staff assists the lawyer and the client in a multitude of helpful ways. An in-house coordinator remains in close contact with the attorney and the client throughout the duration of a case. Clients receive a host of wraparound JFS services, including social work support; assistance with housing, food, and utilities; and employment and mental health support.

The program often interfaces with other community agencies such as HAVEN, Lakeshore Legal Aid, Common Ground, Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, Justice for Our Neighbors, the William Booth Legal Aid Clinic, and Christian Legal Aid.

Thanks to the generous support of the OCBF, JFS’s Legal Referral Service has been hosting popular seminars and trainings with prominent lawyers and judges, and has featured several judge speakers, including Judge Steven Rhodes on the Detroit bankruptcy case. It has tackled a wide range of topics in these events, including redistricting, voter registration, and marijuana legalization.

The program thrives on the enormous talent pool of its attorneys who have come to know that the organization makes it far easier to take on a matter due to the continued involvement of JFS and the Legal

Referral Service. Like everyone else, our program is not immune to the challenges of COVID-19, and we are always looking for talented, dedicated lawyers in the areas of family law, probate, and bankruptcy. Those who are interested are welcome to contact Kelly Goldberg at (248) 592-1907 or kgoldberg@jfsdetroit.org for information on how they may lend their services. ^א_ב

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The screenshot shows the website's navigation bar with links for FIND HELP, VOLUNTEER, GIVE, DONATE NOW, ABOUT US, and CONTACT US. The main content area features a photo of two men in conversation. Below the photo, the text reads: "Legal Referral Service. The JFS Legal Referral Service was created to help clients facing tough economic times to obtain legal consultation and possible representation. Whether your situation requires a simple phone call or letter, a meeting, motion, or the filing of a lawsuit, the lawyers who volunteer their time have the expertise spanning many specialties including: Family law, Elder law, Probate, Debt resolution, Bankruptcy, Real estate, and Landlord and tenant issues."