

## ERIE COUNTY PRO BONO OPTIONS, January 14, 2010

### A. Legal Aid Volunteer Attorney (LAVA) program

The pro bono program in Erie County is the Legal Aid Volunteer Attorney (LAVA) program which is a cooperative effort of NWLS and the Erie County Bar Association (ECBA). Administration of the program is done by NWLS through its Central Intake Unit. To apply for help, applicants call (814) 452-6957 or 1-800-665-6957, Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 4 PM.

Intake screeners complete a financial screening, conduct a conflict check and determine if the problem fits within NWLS case acceptance criteria. If found eligible, a NWLS Intake Attorney conducts a brief interview, gathers specific facts, and completes a referral checklist.

Once the client's signature is obtained, NWLS contacts are made to find a LAVA attorney who is willing to accept the case. NWLS follows-up with confirming paperwork and documents to both the attorney and the client. The client is advised to call the LAVA Attorney's office to make an appointment.

After referral, NWLS is required to conduct periodic requests for status updates. Upon resolution of the matter, the LAVA attorney completes a standard closing summary form and forwards it to NWLS.

As many as 70% of the private attorneys practicing in Erie County participate in the LAVA Program. The program was founded in 1982 and has served more than 6,000 clients since its inception.

Attorneys handled a variety of civil cases through LAVA including: Defense of lawsuits, drivers license suspension, wills, guardianship, denial of visitation, bankruptcy, custody defense, child support plaintiffs and others.

#### Ways to volunteer:

- Direct Representation: LAVA attorneys generously donate their time by providing direct representation to eligible clients. NWLS refers eligible clients to attorneys with expertise in, or experience with, their particular type of legal problem. Participating attorneys specify the legal areas in which they will accept referrals and this information is used when linking an applicant with an attorney.
- Conduct No-Fault Divorce Clinics: LAVA Program participants also teach our pro se divorce clinics. The clinic provides clients with blank forms, sample pleadings and instruction on filing a pro se no-fault consensual divorce action.
- Other Ways to Volunteer: Attorneys may volunteer as a consultant, mentor or conduct community presentations.

For more information on the LAVA Program or details about how to become a volunteer, please contact:

David A. Baxter, Esq.  
1001 State Street  
Erie, Pennsylvania 16501  
Phone: (814) 452-6949, Ext. 101  
Fax: (814) 452-3734  
[dbaxter@nwls.org](mailto:dbaxter@nwls.org)  
[www.nwls.org/LAVA.htm](http://www.nwls.org/LAVA.htm)

**Erie/Administrative/Central Intake Office:**

1001 State Street, Renaissance Centre, Suite 700  
Erie, Pennsylvania 16501  
Telephone: (814) 452-6949; (800) 753-5704  
New Clients Call: (814) 452-6957; (800) 665-6957  
Fax: (814) 452-3734  
[intake@nwls.org](mailto:intake@nwls.org)  
[www.nwls.org/Clinics.htm](http://www.nwls.org/Clinics.htm)

**B. Nonprofit Pro Bono Project: Professionals Helping Nonprofits**

Regardless of size, today's nonprofits must follow federal and state laws and regulations as well as balancing their responsibility to both those they serve and those from which they solicit money. Many nonprofits find themselves in the unenviable position of increased demand for services with dwindling resources. This environment compels many to operate without professional guidance even when they must address important legal and financial matters. Adherence to state and federal laws and regulations can avoid costly errors requiring a large commitment of both financial resources and remedial attention by board and staff.

In an effort to provide sound legal advice to local nonprofits, *The Nonprofit Pro Bono Project: Professionals Helping Nonprofits* was formed to match eligible nonprofit organizations with local attorneys and certified public accountants who have volunteered to provide free consultation and education to the nonprofit community. The Nonprofit Pro Bono Project's goal is to enhance the effectiveness of regional nonprofit organizations by providing access to professional services. Needs Assessment and Direct Assistance are aimed at small to medium-sized nonprofit organizations; eligibility will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

This project is a collaborative effort of the:

- Erie County Bar Association
- The Nonprofit Partnership
- Northwestern Legal Services
- The Pennsylvania Institute of Certified Public Accountants, Erie Chapter

Services provided, include:

Law Clinics: Open enrollment law clinics offer a legal checkup of relevant nonprofit legal issues in a classroom setting. Following a general presentation,

additional attorneys are present to answer more specific questions posed by attendees. Inquiries needing further clarification are referred to volunteer attorneys who work one-on-one with the agency.

Needs Assessment: Volunteer professionals are available to provide nonprofits with a broad spectrum of needs assessment to verify compliance with the law. Initial assessment may include a review of the following:

1. Articles of incorporation
2. Bylaws
3. IRS determination
4. Personnel manuals and policies
5. IRS compliance
6. Financial reporting

Direct Assistance: The Nonprofit Pro Bono Project matches nonprofit organizations with volunteer professionals, who provide free consultation on a variety of legal and financial issues including:

1. Starting a nonprofit (incorporation, tax exempt application)
2. Employment
3. Real estate
4. Tax
5. Governance
6. Contractual issues

Applying for the Pro Bono Project: Nonprofits who are financially unable to meet the expense of professional assistance may apply for Pro Bono Project Assistance. While all services are free, clients are responsible for paying filing fees and other out-of-pocket costs.

Visit <http://www.thenonprofitpartnership.org/pro-bono-project/> to apply. For more information, call the Nonprofit Partnership at (814) 454-8800 or e-mail [TNP@thenonprofitpartnership.org](mailto:TNP@thenonprofitpartnership.org)