



New Executive Director Named



Deborah J. Hughes, Executive Director, LAC

The LAC Board has appointed Deborah J. Hughes to serve as its executive director beginning in January. Hughes will succeed The Rev. Valerie T. Ambrose who is retiring after 4 years in that position.

Ms. Hughes is an experienced legal professional, having practiced family and employment law in Cedar Rapids, Iowa for 13 years. Since relocating to Grand Rapids in 2004 she has served as a legal consultant and adjunct professor in the School of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies at Grand Valley State University.

Her non-profit leadership and advocacy experience is extensive. Hughes has been

board chair of Girl Scouts of Michigan Shore to Shore (Grand Rapids), Girl Scouts of Mississippi Valley (Iowa and Illinois), St. Luke's (Cedar Rapids) Hospital Hospice Advisory Board, and the Professional Women's Network of Cedar Rapids. She is especially skilled in funds development, advocacy, and strategic planning.

As the LAC readies to celebrate its 10th anniversary Deborah Hughes looks forward to continuing its services to over 16,000 patrons each year. She and the board will also explore new ways the LAC can improve access to our justice system for persons representing themselves in court.

Two Recent Patrons

Most of the patrons of the LAC need assistance with family law or landlord tenant issues. Each day 80 walk-in patrons are helped with matters relating to divorce, child custody, parenting time, changing child support, being granted grandparenting time, establishing paternity, or understanding the legal steps of evictions. Two recent patrons were helped as follows:

A visibly pregnant woman came to the LAC with her completed child custody packet. When reviewing the form our staff attorney, Chris Gilman, noticed the terms *abusive* and *PPO*. She gave the patron some written and verbal information

about domestic violence and area services available to her. She then went to make the required copies of the court paperwork for the patron. When Chris returned she saw the woman reading and nodding at a chart listing signs of abuse. Chris asked her additional questions to make sure she understood her options and to help determine if she had a safety plan. The woman then went to the clerk's office to file her paperwork and we knew she would be safe for at least the time being.

An illiterate gentleman came to the LAC with a writ of garnishment. We determined he had cosigned his daughter's lease

and was named as a party in her eviction action, in which a money judgment was entered against them both. His only income was Social Security Disability and he was told it cannot be garnished. He was also informed that since he would not be receiving an income tax refund now or in the future, that he had nothing to fear. He was then given additional information, such as making sure he appeared in court if he got a subpoena, and told to come back to the LAC with any legal papers or if he had additional questions. He left extremely relieved.

Legal Assistance Center MATCHING GRANT

The Legal Assistance Center recently received a very generous gift in support of its services and the law students who volunteer at the LAC. Local businessman and philanthropist Armen Oumedian has pledged to contribute a matching grant of \$10,000 each year for three consecutive years to the self-help legal resource center.

A recipient of numerous leadership and philanthropy awards, he is well known for establishing scholarships to encourage students to pursue their life goals through education, focused work and innovation. Appreciating the hands-on skills, knowledge and personal enrichment he gained as a student at Kettering University, Oumedian is pleased to provide similar opportunities to Cooley Law School students through the LAC.

Beginning in the fall of 2011 two Cooley students each term will be awarded funding to serve up to 20 hours per week at the LAC. Qualifying students will be required to serve a minimum of 2 terms at the Center, during which time they will hone their patron interview skills and provide legal information, forms, and other legal resources to persons choosing to represent themselves to settle family law or landlord tenant disputes.

The board and staff of the LAC are very grateful to Mr. Oumedian for recognizing



Armen Oumedian, matching grant donor to the LAC, is pictured above with Cooley Law School student, Brian Eggleston, who is benefiting from the scholarship fund established by Mr. Oumedian

the value of the student volunteers at the Center. His funding is also a model to the students of giving back to one's community through the sharing of one's time, skills, and financial resources. He is very pleased to foster this learning opportunity to law students to broaden their legal knowledge and community involvement while serving patrons of the LAC.

How You Can Help

1. Make a tax deductible contribution to continue the services provided by the Legal Assistance Center. Donations are especially welcome to help the LAC meet the recently awarded \$10,000 matching gift described elsewhere in this newsletter.
2. Tell someone you know about the Legal Assistance Center. The more the community knows about what we do, the more people we can assist.
3. Come visit us. You are welcome to stop by the Center and see for yourself how services are provided. The Center is open Tuesday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on the 5th floor of the Kent County Courthouse. If you call ahead, we will be pleased to introduce you to our staff and volunteers and give you a tour of the Center.

Essential to the services provided by the Legal Assistance Center are the hours volunteered by local attorneys and students from Cooley Law School, Grand Valley State University, and Davenport University. Not only do the paralegal and law students receive valuable hands-on legal education and experience, they also reduce operating costs by contributing more hours each year than the LAC's 3 full-time equivalent employees.

Funding the Legal Assistance Center

With a cash operating budget of \$170,000 and with 16,000 patrons served in 2011, the LAC serves each patron for less than \$11. Currently support is contributed from 4 sectors:

- Patrons
- Kent County
- The area legal community, including Cooley Law School, the Grand Rapids Bar Association's Justice Foundation of West Michigan, the Access to Justice Fund of the Michigan State Bar Foundation, local attorneys and law firms

- Grants and gifts from individuals and foundations outside the legal community

The LAC is an effective and cost-efficient tool for persons to navigate the court system.

Going forward, the Legal Assistance Center seeks increasing community awareness and broader community support for what is truly a service that benefits our entire community.

Who Uses the LAC?

One of only five self-help legal resource centers in Michigan (two of which the LAC helped launch), the LAC has become a valuable resource for referrals by the courts, local attorneys, and social service agencies. In each of the past three years assistance has been provided to 14,500 walk-in patrons and another 2,000 phone patrons.

- 66% of LAC patrons have household incomes of less than \$20,000 per year.
- 96% of LAC patrons reside in Kent County.
- 53% of LAC patrons have high school education or less.
- 78% of LAC patrons receive assistance with family law matters.
- 53% of LAC patrons are female and 47% are male.
- The average patron of the LAC has 2 children, so each year over 40,000 lives are directly affected by the LAC.

History of the Legal Assistance Center

The Legal Assistance Center arose from the vision of Grand Rapids lawyer John Cumminsky, often called the "father" of pro bono services in Michigan. It was brought to life through a collaboration of the Grand Rapids Bar Association, Legal Aid of Western Michigan, Kent County, the City of Grand Rapids, and the Michigan State Bar Foundation. After three years of planning and the raising of over \$1 million, the Center opened in March of 2002 in the newly built Kent County Courthouse.

Need for the Legal Assistance Center

People continue to represent themselves in steadily increasing numbers. In Kent County and across the nation, one-half of persons appearing in family court are representing themselves. The cost of legal representation is now beyond the reach of those of modest or even moderate means. At the same time, legal issues touch our lives with greater frequency than ever before. The complexity of modern life makes access to legal dispute resolution more important than ever.

Mission of the Legal Assistance Center

The threefold mission of the Legal Assistance Center is: to provide information and forms to people who choose to represent themselves in court; to offer paralegal and law students a hands-on educational experience using an interdisciplinary approach to resolving legal disputes; and to provide advocacy and community education about the legal system to improve the general public's access to the justice system.

Work of the Legal Assistance Center

The Legal Assistance Center helps the people of West Michigan resolve disputes and increase their understanding of the legal system by:

- Preparing individuals for competent self-representation.
- Providing information and education about legal options and procedures.
- Improving access to established legal service programs and private attorneys.
- Improving access to community agencies and resources outside the legal system.

The LAC provides direct assistance in the areas of family law, landlord/tenant, garnishment, civil small claims cases, and probate. We do not give legal advice, provide legal representation or assist with criminal matters, appeals, or filing civil lawsuits.

2011 Revenues

Kent County	47,500
Pledges from Law Firms & Attorneys	27,000
Patron Copies & Informational Packets	47,000
Grants & Unpledged Gifts	43,000
Special Events	10,000
West Michigan Justice Foundation	10,000

\$184,500

2011 Expenses

Wages, Benefits & Taxes	152,000
Office Supplies, Equipment, Printing & Postage	14,300
Parking, Volunteer Services & Continuing Ed.	7,500
Telephone, Accounting & Insurance	8,000
Marketing & Miscellaneous	2,700

\$184,500

In-kind Contributions

The 2011 cash operating budget was \$184,500 compared to \$220,000 in 2007. This amount does not include in-kind contributions of the staff attorney by Cooley Law School, and utilities and rent by Kent County.

These in-kind contributions total
\$79,800



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Executive Director

Charlie Campbell
Paralegal & Program Coordinator

PART-TIME

Chris Gilman
Staff Attorney

Vickie Hannigan
Paralegal

Brian Eggleston
Cooley Law Student

Pam Stevenson
Bookkeeper

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