

FREE LEGAL ADVICE MAKING IMPACT AT SELF HELP CENTER

They come every Tuesday with problems too complex to handle on their own. The man taken to court by his ex-wife over child support he couldn't afford to pay. The woman trying to evict her troublesome sister. The couple trying to adopt their out-of-state grandchild.

They sit patiently, sometimes for hours, in a brightly lit L-shaped room in the Lee County Justice Center. Every 15 minutes or so, Andrew Banyai, executive director of the Lee County Legal Aid Society, pops out of a smaller room and beckons whomever is next.

That's when the magic happens.

A year after Lee County Clerk of Court Linda Doggett launched the Self Help Center, its most popular feature by far has been the free legal consultations that the Legal Aid Society conducts from 1-4:30 p.m. each Tuesday. Between June 12 and December 18 last year, 260 people received consultations and another 66 were turned away because the supply of legal services couldn't meet the demand, according to statistics provided by the Clerk's office.

"The attorney help service has been an overwhelming success," said Michael J. Healy, general counsel for the Clerk's office. "Andrew Banyai and Lee County Legal Aid absolutely exceeded our expectations with the work they are doing to help people understand how to approach or deal with issues on their cases. They are a perfect fit for the center and so great to work with."

Banyai, co-chair of the LCBA Pro Bono Committee, is usually accompanied by at least one other volunteer attorney. They receive no monetary compensation — the entire Self Help Center is pro bono and unfunded by taxpayer dollars — but the experience leaves an impression.

"The people who come to the Self Help Desk are so appreciative of any help they can get with their current plight," said Travis Russell of Henderson, Franklin,

Starnes & Holt, P.A. "When nearly everyone who comes in with what they think is an insurmountable problem leaves with even a glimmer of hope, all they can say is 'Thank you!' while walking out the door, and to me that is the most satisfying part of helping these people."

The simplicity of the process contrasts with the knotty tangles that help-seekers often find themselves in. The room where the consultations take place is soothingly spartan, with beige-paneled walls, subdued lighting and just enough room for a modest round table and four or five chairs.

On a recent Tuesday, Banyai and Russell sat in two of those chairs as they greeted a visitor with a family law case. Banyai and Russell had him sign a waiver, verified there was no conflict of interest, and listened as he explained his problem. Russell looked up his case number on his phone and he and Banyai quickly read through the files.

A back and forth discussion ensued, and Banyai answered a series of questions with practical advice that helped allay some of the visitor's fears.

"A lot of these people are desperate and scared, and all they really need is just some basic guidance," Banyai said. "Not everyone can afford an attorney, but everyone should be able to obtain a basic understanding of their legal circumstances and how to deal with them. That's what we're trying to provide access to here."

Banyai's goal is to expand the number of days and hours the consultations are available, and to have regular days set aside for certain kinds of legal issues. In late January, attorney Luke Johnson joined Banyai for a special probate-focused session that leveraged Johnson's particular experience.

"Navigating through law is a complicated procedure that requires a thorough understanding and analytical thinking," Johnson said. "It's nothing like what you may see on TV."

The more diverse the roster of attorneys participating, the better the help. Healy sees the most efficient solution coming from other pro bono organizations willing to partner with Legal Aid and the Clerk's office to provide volunteer attorneys on a regular schedule. If, for instance, an organization guaranteed attorneys would appear for consultations every Thursday morning, the Clerk's office could advertise that to the public, Healy points out.

"We also love Scott Atwood's idea of encouraging attorneys to work the Tuesday afternoon using pro bono hours," he said.

Legal Aid has submitted a grant proposal to The Florida Bar Foundation to fund a program that would use the carrot on a stick of CLE credits as incentive for doing pro bono work. It would link interested attorneys with experienced mentors in areas of need, like landlord-tenant, wage garnishment, judgment collection

and, increasingly, immigration. Attorneys would learn, fulfill their CLE requirements and put their newfound knowledge to use in the Self Help Center.

The consultations there have drawn raves in their first year, with Lee County Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass and the United Way of Lee, Hendry, Glades and Okeechobee Counties helping Legal Aid secure other grant money to further enable Banyai's work. But their continued growth and utility of the service may ultimately come down to a willingness to commit resources, whether they come from legal associations, government entities or individual attorneys.

"I would tell attorneys who are on the fence about volunteering to stop by one day and just sit in on a few sessions to experience what goes on at the Self Help Center," Russell said. "Maybe it's just me, but some of these issues can really pull at the heartstrings and make you want to help in any way possible." ☞



Travis Russell and Andrew Banyai conduct a free legal consultation at the Clerk of Court's Self Help Center.