

MVLS seeks family lawyers for Judicare

BY STEVE LASH

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The Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service will begin to pay attorneys \$80 per hour next month to represent low-income litigants in Baltimore who are representing themselves in complex and emotionally charged family-law cases.

The Baltimore City Circuit Court has many domestic cases involving contested issues of child custody, child support and property, in which the litigants are too poor to hire lawyers with sufficient expertise to assist them through the legal morass, said Bonnie A. Sullivan, MVLS's new executive director.

Standard pro-bono programs are ineffective because these contested cases often prove too time-consuming for lawyers to take gratis without their practices taking a significant financial hit, she said in explaining the demand for the low-fee initiative.

"Pro bono will never meet the need," said Sullivan, who took over as executive director this summer after the retirement of Winifred C. Borden. "The volume of cases is so high and the number of lawyers with the expertise, who are willing to take these cases, is small."

This month, Sullivan sent a letter to family-law attorneys in Baltimore urging them to participate in the Judicare Family Law Project, a reduced fee program to help low-income litigants get representation. In the letter, Sullivan stated that MVLS seeks Maryland attorneys in good standing with at least three years of family-law experience or attorneys willing to be supervised by a lawyer with that much experience.

"We've been in this business a long time," Sullivan said in explaining MVLS's request for seasoned attorneys. "We are not serving our clients well if we don't have experienced lawyers."

The recruitment effort has the support of Baltimore City Circuit Court Judge Audrey J.S. Carrion, who oversees the court's family-law docket. Carrion sent a letter to family-law attorneys in the city's bar association urging them to accept Sullivan's invitation.

"There's nothing better than having attorneys that are familiar with the family-law practice" take the more complex, contested cases, Carrion said. "Access and custody of children are extremely important issues."

Pro se crisis

In her letter, Carrion stated that the Baltimore court is "experiencing a crisis

because of the ever increasing numbers of pro se litigants" with contested family-law claims.

"Accordingly, I encourage family-law practitioners in Baltimore City to sign up for this worthwhile program," Carrion added in the letter. "Your participation will provide an invaluable service to the court and your community by expanding legal representation to low-income family-law litigants."

According to Baltimore City Circuit Court data, 82 percent, or 1,976, of the 2,400 divorce, custody or child support cases that went to a hearing in the Baltimore City Circuit Court last fiscal year involved at least one pro se litigant. Of the pro se litigants, 41 percent had household income levels below \$15,000.

The Maryland Legal Services Corp., which provided a grant of \$297,000 for the Judicare Family Law Project, has requested that MVLS find lawyers to handle at least 120 contested family law cases in Baltimore and 40 in Washington County.

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MVLS Executive Director Bonnie Sullivan hopes the Judicare project's rate of \$80 an hour will allow experienced family lawyers to take on complex cases they could never afford to handle for free.

Help for low-income litigants

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ty this fiscal year, Sullivan said. About \$41,000 would go toward administrative costs, while the rest is earmarked for payment to the attorneys, she added.

Litigants will be informed of the Judicare program through posters and leaflets posted in the Pro Se Courthouse Clinic at the Baltimore City Circuit Court, Sullivan added.

Attorneys who accept the complex family-law cases would be paid \$80 for up to 20 hours, or \$1,600, Sullivan said. The next few hours would be performed pro

bono, but if the work exceeds 25 hours, the fee resumes for up to 10 hours. Total available compensation would be \$2,400 for 35 hours of work, she added.

Attorneys also will be reimbursed for reasonable litigation costs, Sullivan said.

To be eligible for the Judicare program, an individual's annual income may be no greater than \$24,444, a figure that increases with the size of the family. For example, a litigant supporting a family of four on a yearly income of \$47,000 would qualify for the program, MVLS said.