

Holding a Free Legal Clinic

Folks

Has anyone put on a free legal clinic? My town SUCKS at providing services to low income folks. I was thinking of putting together a free legal clinic to help these folks.

Has anyone done this before? Any tips on making it successful?

Thanks

Step 1: Call your malpractice carrier.

John Varde, Illinois

So, San Mateo has several services they provide that I take part in. The first is "Lawyers in the Library" - where the libraries (some law libraries, some general public libraries) do the advertising for folks to be put on a list. Folks get 20 minutes for some help with a lawyer who donates their time. It is a monthly program, so Library "A" has it on the 3rd Wednesday, etc. There is a clear disclaimer that the folks sign saying we are not their counsel. Often it is the crazy pro-pers who know more Clerks than I do, but there are also people who just need a few minutes of a professional's time to understand what is going on. If interested, I can send over the contact info off-list and you could pick their brain.

Another thing I take part in is the "Community Law Night", where there are dozens of attorney who take over a community center (it used to be at the Courthouse before budget cuts) and there is a swarm of hundreds of folks who are routed, as best as possible, to an attorney with the needed experience.

As you can guess, the biggest issues are: Landlord/Tenant; Family Law; Immigration; Debt Collection. But I have had folks ask me about bank fraud, contract drafting; employment, tax, and copyright issues.

I'd say the biggest issue is getting enough attorneys to commit to a couple hours of time on a regular basis. The list-serve for the Lawyers in the Library has over 80 attorneys and they can still have problems staffing the events.

Drew Winghart, California

Una Lee Jost recently posted, if I recall correctly, about a clinic she was part of. And People's College of Law used to put on such clinics. I hope you find a good answer. I will query a couple of folks and see if I can find something more useful to share.

Robert Link, California

Does your state bar do legal clinics? They may have resources that would be helpful for you in setting one up in your town, and having it affiliated with them would help with the potential liability issues.

I applaud you for wanting to do this!!

Karen Fetter, paralegal, South Carolina

The San Antonio Bar Association, in conjunction with Legal Aid, has put together national award-winning programs. It is called the Community Justice Program. Other local bar associations throughout the country have used it as a model. Generally, they have been receptive to modeling inquiries.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

I'd break this problem up in to two parts -- first, there's the logistics part that anyone holding any sort of event would have to deal with. This would include things like finding a venue, publicity, finding volunteer lawyers, etc. Second, there's the legal specific stuff, such as getting the waivers signed that Andrew mentions and also making sure you have lawyers in each of the practice areas you anticipate encountering. You may want to limit your clinic first -- in other words, on your publicity material, list that you will only deal with family and landlord/tenant law, for instance.

I've done a fair amount of pro bono stuff and can't point to a single case where someone took what I said and got their problem resolved in the way I was hoping. I don't recall any pro bono client ever taking notes on what I was telling them and I am generally very specific of who to call, what address to go to, what forms to fill out, etc. The information I provided was good, but I think most pro bono people need more hand holding than a one-time pro bono interaction can provide.

There are, of course, also those people who come to the clinic for non-productive reasons -- e. g. (1) they want to argue with you about how they are free citizens and why the US Constitution doesn't apply to them, (2) they just want someone to listen to them while they vent about their problem, (3) they describe a problem, but have absolutely no documentation or evidence of any kind,, and (4) those that start yelling at you when you tell them bad news (e. g. they missed their appeal deadline, etc).

I used to do a lot of pro bono work at a homeless shelter in San Jose. To this day, I think I was the first lawyer that a lot of these people had ever seen (aside from public defenders, district attorneys, etc.). A lot of the people I met fell in to (3) with a couple of them wanting help with criminal charges they faced back in the 1970s or earlier.

Andy I, Chen, California

I've participated in a few of these.

First, I'd suggest you do this under the umbrella of a local bar association or local legal aid organization (I did mine under legal aid organization).

Second, it depends on what you are offering them. At my legal clinic, they had family attorneys offering "Advice only", i. e, no forms or representation. I was doing estate planning, powers of attorney, that sort of thing. I had laptop and printer and did a goodly number of EP type documents; simple ones, but nonetheless, useful ones.

But I can't emphasize enough; do this thru some sort of organization and not on your own.

Ronald Jones, Florida

The DC Bar has a pro bono clinic similar to that Andrew describes every other month, but it's for individuals starting or operating small businesses. Like the program Andrew describes, the DC Bar require clients to sign a form that states that the attorney is providing advice on a one-off basis but not establishing a long-term a/c relationship. I have the training materials and the various forms that are used for intake and reporting. Contact me off-list if you would like copies.

Mark Del Bianco, District of Columbia

I've been my local bar association's pro bono coordinator for several years now. I agree with all who said to partner with a local legal aid society or other pro bono agency. We partner up and plan several Ask-a-Lawyer events at the local library quarterly, and if we can get enough volunteers we're trying to do it more often. I wouldn't even think about doing this on my own. If I do something on my own, it would be very, very targeted to speaking about or answering questions on one topic.

First, you need to have some sort of screening process so you can determine if you can even do the consultation. You need to be able to do a conflict check, and having an intake form and an intermediary helps with that.

Also, what if you don't have any knowledge of that area? It helps to have several attorneys on hand to fill in those gaps. Third, as referenced, at least here if we are doing it in conjunction with the legal aid agency, we have malpractice coverage from them. Finally, some folks have ongoing needs beyond an initial consultation, and truly would qualify for pro bono legal assistance, so having the local pro bono agency also do the screening on hand is helpful to provide real assistance (anyone can get a few minutes of assistance regardless of financial need, but for ongoing pro bono services must financially qualify.) It may also affect the agency's funding as well.

Make sure where you have it has private conference rooms (such as study rooms at most libraries). Also, you may get a LOT of people, so having staff there to handle intake and if needed crowd control is vital.

Cynthia V. Hall, Florida

I've been volunteering at our County Bar Associations pro bono clinics since about 2 months after I got sworn in as an attorney.

We have intake forms so people can give demographic information (our grant funders want to know who we are serving) then a short description of the problem so we can match them with the right attorney. No waivers. But these are general advice clinics, we don't represent people (although we can if we want give them our cards for them to contact us and formally enter into a representation agreement). Some people think they will get an attorney that night - especially if they have a trial in 2 weeks and suddenly realized that the rules of evidence and procedure apply to them.

But we pretty much hold firm.

The big things you need -- privacy. These are legal consults. Make sure you have enough room for people to speak away from everyone wait. Referral numbers -- either to the local legal aid bureau or what have you. We even have the number for various social services, sometimes people don't have a legal problem they just need some social service. Everyone sees an attorney but then are given the other information they need.

In general, I have loved my time at the clinics. I have at least given folks more knowledge than they had when they walked in. NOTHING feels better than telling a woman who has been abused by her spouse who then tells her he wants a divorce and she will be out on the streets with nothing because everything is in his name that she has rights. That she WILL get at least her fair share of the stuff. Sure, you get the people who get mad because you can't solve their problem with a wave of your hand, you can't make people be decent through the legal process or they just don't have a case. Sure, you get the nutjobs. But in over all, most folks just need to know their rights. And didn't we all become lawyers to help people? Don't get much more direct helping someone that doing a pro bono clinic.

Elizabeth Pugliese, Maryland

Atta boy, Andy Chen!

Andy hit a home run with his tutorial.

The Austin Bar Association some years ago was instrumental in setting up Volunteer Legal Services (Inc. ?) here.

"VLS" has weekly free 'clinics. ' VLS has a paid staff but it does not 'staff' the clinics, volunteer lawyers do.

I participate each Wednesday evening in a north Austin clinic which is conducted at a middle school gym. Some of the lawyers who show up are 'regulars. ' At least one of the regular lawyers is a legal aid employee. I have no idea if the school district is paid for use of the space and utilities.

They have cafeteria tables set up, registration tables, etc.

When the volunteer lawyers show up at the school there is always a long line waiting outside. I do not recall seeing a male lawyer there in coat and tie or seeing women 'dressed for court. '

The line is 'processed' into a line for family law cases and civil matters such as evictions and collections, which are the two major types of matters. The program has

handouts on various subjects which can be given to the clients. If you asked, the program may share their handouts with you,

I think most of the clients who show up are referred by other programs, such as Legal Aid, the bar association, etc.

I think the program has some kind of professional liability insurance covering the consults; am not sure about this.

We are supposed to limit the consultations to 15 minutes. Sometimes a VLS staffer has to approach wagging her finger indicating the matter is out of time. Client 'paperwork' is not reviewed although on occasion select provisions may be pointed out.

The clinic is opened at 6 PM and we are out of there by 8 pm, usually.

Andy Chen described what I see to a "T. "

VLS can be contacted at 512. 476. 5550 if you have questions about how to get started, etc. Also, I would think the American Bar Association may have information about establishing programs.

Rob V. Robertson, Texas

I've been playing Spot the Issue at a Senior Citizens Center for 18 years.

The second Tuesday of each month (today) from 8:45 to 10:00. 20 +/- minutes slots. An hour plus of post meeting follow up letter, diary next action, Birthday and add to client data base. (Always ask for their birthday with initial info gatherings).

The \$3. 00 cooked breakfast is free.

File under: Hey, you never know.

Probably results in \$5,000 a year

A high Feel Good Factor

Michael J. Sweeney, Connecticut

[UPDATE]

So we just had out Community Law Night last night and we must of had over 60 attorneys show up. I think that is an incredible turnout on behalf of Bar Members. We were at a local community center and they fed us. The problem we encountered is that very few people came in. Because there was no "reservation" system they had no idea who might be coming or how busy we would be. When it was done 5+ years ago, there were over 200 people seeking help. Last night, by 6:30 the organizers were telling folks they could leave if they wanted because there wasn't a lot of turn out by people. Hopefully this will grow in the coming years as people become familiar with it; but I still think a monthly event, with screened calls is better.

Drew Winghart

Lynette Whitfield? (She has experience.)

Julie Mills, Ohio

Are you near a bigger city/town? Have you looked into senior center programs (as someone else mentioned), Catholic Charities (here, they provide training for specific legal assistance areas, also, e. g.

immigration-related matters) or Legal Aid, a predecessor of which used to have classes on how to fill out forms for uncontested divorces (some courthouses also offer this)? Just some thoughts as to where to look for programs already in existence.

Veronica M. Schnidrig, Oregon

