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LAS Launches Domestic Violence Initiative

Legal Aid Society Partners with Metro Government's Office of Family Safety to Launch Domestic Violence Initiative

Volunteer lawyers to provide in-court legal assistance for domestic violence victims

NASHVILLE, Tenn., Oct. 29, 2015—Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland, Tennessee's largest non-profit law firm, has announced a new partnership with Metro's Office of Family Safety to provide free legal assistance to domestic violence victims in Order of Protection hearings.

The partnership is in direct response to Nashville's 2013 Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Assessment, which included 55 recommendations to help close assistance gaps for domestic violence victims seeking safety, including improvements to the Orders of Protection system.

"Through the Mayor's Office, Metro applied for and received a three-year STOP Violence Against Women Grant from the state of Tennessee to support coordinated, multidisciplinary approaches to improve the judicial system's response to domestic violence," said Diane Lance, Department Head for Metro's Office of Family Safety. "Legal Aid Society's substantial record of advocacy for victims of domestic violence makes them the ideal partner in improving victims' access to justice within the city's Orders of Protection system."

The grant will fund a Legal Aid Society attorney part time to recruit and train volunteer attorneys to represent Order of Protection petitioners. DarKenya Waller, managing attorney of Legal Aid Society's Nashville office, will work directly with Family Safety Advocates at the Jean Crowe Advocacy Center to facilitate ongoing

recruitment, training and victim representation.

“In domestic violence situations, abusers likely control the family finances, and therefore, have the resources to hire an attorney. Typically, victims are left to fend for themselves,” DarKenya Waller explained. “Without representation, victims may have to answer questions directly from their abuser, which could be both hurtful and irrelevant to the Order of Protection hearing. Unfortunately, judges cannot intervene on a victim’s behalf, and that is where an attorney becomes essential.”

To identify petitioners with legal needs, the Jean Crowe Advocacy Center will refer cases to Legal Aid Society for representation in court.

Though planning for the program’s development began in August 2015, the program officially launched its volunteer recruitment and training in October, which is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Nashville law firm Waller, Lansden, Dortch & Davis has committed to providing *pro bono* assistance to this effort.

“Volunteer attorneys are the lifeblood of this partnership, and through this new program, attorneys can use their talents to make a tangible difference to a person facing abuse,” DarKenya Waller said. “With a strong advocate by their side, we hope victims will feel validated, and that their trust in the judicial system will be restored.”

“This partnership demonstrates how public, non-profit and private sectors can work together to advance justice in the region,” said Lance. “The city is pleased to be working with Legal Aid Society, and we hope that this is only the beginning of a growing partnership.”

Volunteers interested in participating in this partnership can call (615) 244-6610 for more information.

Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland advocates for fairness and justice under the law. The non-profit law firm offers free civil legal representation, educational programs and advice to ensure people in its region are able to protect their livelihoods, their health and their families. It serves 48 counties from offices in Clarksville, Columbia, Cookeville, Gallatin, Murfreesboro, Nashville, Oak Ridge and Tullahoma. Legal Aid Society is funded in part by United Way. Learn more at www.las.org, by following the firm on [Facebook](#) or calling Legal Aid Society at 615-244-6610.

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