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Lawyers offer free counsel to people who can't afford to pay



Kevin Clark / The Herald

Patrick Songy (center) addresses a client as Todd Hubbard looks through paperwork at the Snohomish County Courthouse in Everett on Friday morning. Songy is one of many volunteers with the Housing Justice Program, an arm of Snohomish County Legal Services, that provide free legal services to indigent people facing eviction and other legal proceedings.

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EVERETT — The panic often is written on their faces.

People threatened with eviction or foreclosure could lose their apartment or house, and they need help

to sort things out.

Everett attorney Patrick Songy hopes at the very least to buy them more time, maybe a few weeks to find another place to go or enough notice to put their belongings in storage.

“We try to help them move with dignity, even if that means just having time to pack up their possessions,” Songy said.

Songy is among the 200 lawyers and paralegals who volunteer with [Snohomish County Legal Services](#). He volunteers his time with the Housing Justice Project, which provides free legal counsel to people facing eviction or foreclosure who can't afford to hire their own lawyers. The clinic operates a few hours a day Tuesdays through Fridays, on the first floor of the Snohomish County Courthouse.

The goal is to help people find solutions before court action is taken. An eviction filing becomes part of a person's permanent public record even if it's dropped. That can affect a person's ability to find housing in the future, Snohomish County Legal Services executive director Benjamin Haslam said.

His agency works closely with social service agencies to help their clients avoid evictions, he said. If that's not possible, the volunteer lawyers are there for court hearings, advice and mediation between the tenants and landlords.

The housing clinic is one of 10 operated by Snohomish County Legal Services. The nonprofit has been around since 1983. It helped nearly 1,400 new clients last year with various civil legal problems, including divorces, domestic violence, evictions, foreclosures, debt relief, bankruptcy and wills.

The organization prioritizes cases for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault and situations where children may be at risk, Haslam said.

The staff and volunteers also are “focused on preventing homelessness by ensuring tenants and homeowners facing eviction or foreclosure are treated fairly,” he said.

There are six lawyers and one paralegal on staff. The organization relies on lawyers volunteering their own time to help additional indigent clients. Those volunteers typically give about 2,200 hours a year. Volunteer paralegals donate additional time.

“We absolutely couldn't do it without volunteers,” Haslam said.

Ann Brice has volunteered since 1994. She's been on the board of directors and also helped the organization drum up donations.

“I truly believe in access to justice for all. We as attorneys are very fortunate and have knowledge that can be very important in someone's life. We have a responsibility to help people navigate the legal system. We have a responsibility to give back,” Brice said.

She is a partner at the Law Office of Brice & Timm in Everett and generally works at juvenile court.

Part of what Snohomish County Legal Services and its volunteers try to do is empower clients to help themselves, she said. The lawyers can't represent every client directly but they can advise them how to fill out paperwork or compile the documentation to file in their cases.

Songy is a former public defender. Criminal defendants are guaranteed legal representation. That's not the case in the majority of civil cases. That puts more stress on people who are already facing great challenges in life, including disabilities or mental illness, he said.

Songy and his family moved to Everett from Florida in September. He hung up his own shingle and started volunteering with Snohomish County Legal Services. Not only is it a good way to give back, but it helped him network in a new city, Songy said.

He also volunteers with the family law clinic, predominantly helping folks with divorces, including child custody and support issues.

He has learned a lot from the organization's staff attorneys and taken advantage of the continuing education classes that are offered.

Songy said his involvement also helped land him a job at the Deno Millikan Law Firm in Everett. The firm's partners are big supporters of the agency.

“I definitely owe a lot to those folks at Snohomish County Legal Services,” he said.

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For more information about Snohomish County Legal Services, call 425-258-9283. If you are a low income person and need legal services, call 888-201-1014.

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