

Helping Hands: Volunteers drive [MidPenn Legal Services](#)' pro bono programs



By Kathy J. Cella

As the sole provider of free, civil legal assistance in Centre County, MidPenn Legal Services, a Centre County United Way partner agency, is the legal safety net for the disabled, elderly, children, working poor and survivors of domestic violence. We provide critical help for critical situations but, every day, applicants are turned away due to limited resources. In other words, there are not enough legal aid advocates available to meet the variety of needs of the poor.

MidPenn, like other human service agencies, has been subjected to severe funding cuts. We have developed innovative ways to try to fill the justice gap. For instance, through our telephone advice project, individuals can speak with a MidPenn staff attorney without missing work or struggling with transportation or day care issues, and obtain legal advice about their situation.

To increase the legal services available to low-income residents of Centre County, MidPenn works with a cadre of volunteer attorneys from the Centre County Bar Association, the Family Law Clinic at the Penn State Dickinson School of Law and the Middle District Bankruptcy Bar Association Pro Bono Program.

Members of the CCBA donate their time to provide legal advice and representation to MidPenn clients. Centre County volunteer attorneys assist eligible clients on issues such as estate planning, expungements, divorces and adoptions. Clients receive help in obtaining important documents such as wills, powers of attorney and advanced health care directives.

Legal interns from Dickinson School of Law provide MidPenn staff attorneys with additional support by conducting legal research and providing legal assistance to clients. In working with the Family Law Clinic, we have been able to provide an avenue for a number of low-income Centre County parents to obtain assistance with child support, custody, divorce and domestic violence issues.

Referrals are made through the MDBBA's pro bono program, and several Centre County families have been relieved of overwhelming debt. In some cases, homes were saved from foreclosure, sheriff sales were avoided and families were able to obtain peace of mind while recovering from financial crises.

The provision of pro bono services to the needy is a professional obligation that changes lives, and we are grateful for our volunteer attorneys.

MidPenn is a nonprofit law firm providing free civil, legal assistance to low-income residents living in 18 counties in central Pennsylvania. For more information, visit www.midpenn.org or call 1-800-326-9177 to apply for services.

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