

Providing Access to Justice

The Cascadia Mobile Legal Clinic



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One of the most discussed issues across the legal world is what has been termed, “access to justice.” With the rising cost of litigation, potential clients who are middle class or below the poverty line have a difficult time finding a lawyer they can afford when they have a legal problem. According to the 2012-2013 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, more than four out of five low-income litigants in the United States go it alone because they feel priced out of the legal market. We attorneys are feeling the crunch as well. With the rising cost of law school and the rising cost of living, attorneys are having a difficult time finding a way to provide services to low income clients. That is why, when I first heard about local Vancouver/Portland attorneys Christie Martin and Gabrielle (“Gabby”) Richards’s new mobile legal clinic at a local GAL conference this year, I immediately wanted to find out more.

Christie and Gabby started the Cascadia Mobile Legal Clinic with the goal of providing pro bono and reduced-fee legal services to rural areas of Oregon and Washington. The idea came from mobile medical and dental clinics that serve rural areas. The clinic operates out of an RV that Christie and Gabby purchased to indulge their love of traveling and to use for the clinic. Martin and Richards, LLP is also a paperless and virtual office which makes running the clinic, even in rural areas, possible. The clinic screens appointments using the federal poverty guidelines and, depending on income, clients can qualify to have the initial consultation for free and any subsequent services handled pro bono. If the clients do not qualify for a free consultation, they are charged \$35 for the initial consultation and any subsequent services are handled on a sliding scale basis for the fee. Generally the clinic handles any type of civil law such as civil litigation, estate planning, landlord tenant, guardianship, probate, and creditor/debtor. At this time, the clinic does not offer services in family law or criminal defense.

When I interviewed Christie and Gabby for this article, they told me the reaction to the clinic has been overwhelmingly positive. Word of mouth has been great and people ask them about the clinic wherever they stop in their travels because of the sign for Cascadia Mobile Clinic they put on the RV. Whenever

they pull into or pull up to a clinic, people are always excited to see them. In order to set up a clinic, Christie and Gabby contact legal aid and the local bar association in the area where they



wish to go and ask for an endorsement. The local bar association then helps Cascadia set up appointments for any individuals who wish to consult with an attorney. Local attorneys are also volunteering to help with the clinic. As of the day of our interview, the Cascadia Mobile Legal Clinic had hosted two clinics in The Dalles and Hood River, so far with great success. The bar associations are already requesting they return to host more clinics. The types of cases they handle have been all over the map ranging from evictions to helping to complete paperwork a client is having a difficult time understanding. One example Christie and Gabby shared with me involved a family who lived in HUD Section 8 housing who were suffering in the extreme heat this area experienced in July. The landlord was not allowing the tenants of the building to use window air conditioning units and instead wanted them to purchase standing air conditioning units. Standing units are much more expensive and hard for older and disabled tenants to operate. Cascadia was able to successfully help the tenants by reminding the landlord that window air conditioning units were allowed under HUD rules. The client did not feel comfortable going to a lawyer's office to get help but was able to get the help she needed at the clinic.

Looking to the future, Christie and Gabby would like the clinic to become entirely self-sustaining. As the clinic grows, it is most important to keep the good reputation of their services and be able to have all appointment slots full to maximize the number of people helped. The clinics in October will be in Washington and they hope the upcoming clinics will be as successful as the first clinics in Oregon. In the future, they hope attorneys in the areas they visit will also volunteer and more practice areas will be offered to communities.



As the debate over access to justice continues on both a state and national level, attorneys and bar associations will have to continue thinking outside of the box to offer services to low income clients. I am impressed with the Cascadia Mobile Legal Clinic and hope the service model it represents will continue to grow and flourish. For more information about the clinic, and to see upcoming locations and dates, please visit cascadialawyers.com or contact Martin and Richards, LLP at 503-444-3449.



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