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Handle with CARES: Court Uses Federal Funds to Expand Community Support

By Csaba Sukosd | November 25, 2020



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Many people individually have felt the benefit of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. One Ohio court utilized some of the governmental assistance to positively impact thousands of others.

With part of its CARES Act money, the Franklin County Municipal Court expanded staffing for its [Self Help Resource Center](#) in anticipation of a spike in filings and hearings after the court had scaled back operations for months amid concerns due to the pandemic.

“We’ve seen a lot more people scared, stressed, worried about the future, and it’s really taught our staff to be empathetic, be active listeners, and really try and figure out everything we can about someone’s situation,” said Robbie Southers, the resource center’s managing attorney since [it was created three years ago](#).

The additional personnel include a staff attorney and two people – a licensed social worker and a trainee – as part of a social services pilot project.

The resource center is a free walk-in service to help litigants represent themselves in court without a lawyer. Staff can’t offer legal advice, but can point people to helpful resources, including court forms, tools on how to fill out the paperwork, and answers to general questions about court procedures that detail what’s being filed and why.

“I think people are usually relieved to find someone who can take the time with them to figure out what’s going on, and then present their legal options in a way that’s easy to understand,” said Jane Tsai, the staff attorney hired with the CARES Act money.

While the center is equipped to handle a wide variety of legal inquiries, its main focus during the pandemic has been eviction cases. Evictions typically have accounted for 40% of the resource center’s volume. Since COVID, that total jumped to 73%.

Considering that numerous nonlegal concerns are attached to housing matters, such as family, welfare, and financial issues, the court used the opportunity with the CARES Act funds to incorporate social services as part of the information it could provide. The available social services range from guidance for housing opportunities to connecting those in need to community resources and government assistance programs.

In Ohio, part of the CARES funds is assisting with [home relief grants](#) that include rental, mortgage, and utility assistance.

“I love working with people who are struggling because in a crisis situation there’s a lot you can do. There’s a lot of opportunity there,” said Sarah Huelskoetter, the resource center’s social worker.

With the social work program sustained by federal capital through the end of the year, the court is exploring ways to retain it permanently. As part of an expanded outreach, the resource center also added a satellite office at the Greater Columbus Convention Center, where eviction court hearings have taken place since July. Along with its main office on the sixth floor of the municipal court complex, the group is operating a [live online chat](#), both as a means to provide immediate information, but also to prevent anyone from coming to the courthouse or the convention center unnecessarily. These steps limit traffic and potential exposure to the coronavirus.

One of the biggest benefits to having the satellite location in a space like the convention center has been the onsite access to other departments and organizations in order to facilitate various services immediately. In certain instances, those direct connections have been lifesaving.

“One of my staff attorneys noticed that while helping [one woman], she likely was a victim of human trafficking. So, we pulled our social worker in, kind of pulled the whole staff together, talked to her about what was going on,” said Southers.

In its existence, the center has grown from averaging two walk-in visitors a day to currently serving more than 40. In each case, the mantra remains simple to empower self-represented individuals – making sure every person who walks in at least knows their next step.

“It’s that sort of navigation helping people understand how the process works, get where they need to go, and actually have more agency in their own decision,” Huelskoetter said.

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