

## As economy struggles, legal needs escalate

By John Stearns, business editor, / *The Bulletin*

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The economic carnage across the nation from what's been called The Great Recession, which we're told is technically over, is playing out in many ways — some obvious, some not.

Sadly, economic stresses can play out violently at home. Renters can face eviction when a homeowner is foreclosed upon. Employees can go unpaid when an employer hits bottom.

They're situations that often require legal assistance, help many can't afford. For low-income people, the need for that aid is significant these days, as reflected by calls to Bend's Legal Aid office.

"They're seeing an increase in ... domestic violence, unemployment issues and housing issues, (and) they're seeing a big increase in wage claims, employers who aren't able to pay or who aren't paying wages to workers," reported Sandy Hansberger, executive director of The Lawyers' Campaign for Equal Justice, a support arm of Oregon's Legal Aid programs.

Like many organizations trying to keep up with increasing needs caused by the recession, Legal Aid is struggling to keep up with more requests for services. The Bend office, which serves Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook counties, will get a fourth lawyer in February because of the region's rising needs, Hansberger said.

But with so much need and limited funding, many needs go unmet. Studies have shown Legal Aid meets less than 20 percent of the civil legal needs of the poor, Hansberger said.

And the legal troubles related to the economy are expected to increase due, in part, to unemployment benefits that will inevitably expire and more people struggling to get by in what's expected to be a painfully slow and jobless recovery.

To qualify for Legal Aid, which is free, gross incomes must not exceed 125 percent of the federal poverty level. For a family of four, that's \$2,288 a month. For families of three, two and one, it's \$1,907, \$1,518 and \$1,128 a month, respectively.

Legal Aid's calls roughly parallel the sharp increase in numbers of people on food stamps and receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Family, or TANF, benefits, Hansberger said.

And those numbers are staggering.

In Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook counties, there were 36,646 people receiving food stamps in September, a whopping 40 percent more than September 2008, according to figures from the state Department of Human Services.

Central Oregon's most destitute, those receiving TANF, also rose sharply in the last year. There were 995 TANF households in September, or about 2,393 people, up 22 percent from a year ago, when 813 households, or about 1,824 people, were getting the aid, DHS said.

Legal Aid also assists with medical issues, which are among the high-priority civil needs to which its representation is limited, along with food — such as income eligibility for food stamps, shelter, income maintenance and physical safety. About 40 percent of Legal Aid's cases involve family law, usually helping domestic violence victims get and enforce restraining orders, and about 80 percent of Legal Aid's clients are women, most with children to support, according to Hansberger's organization. Unfortunately, the frequency and severity of domestic violence cases are both increasing.

Legal Aid also is doing more to help people straighten out paperwork, Hansberger said, noting that offices are seeing a lot of people who can't get birth certificates, which require photo ID, which requires a birth certificate — which are needed to get a Social Security card, a job or benefits like food stamps.

Despite the demands for Legal Aid, its services remain unfamiliar to many. To improve outreach, the Bend office evaluates cases at four regional locations each month: the Bethlehem Inn in Bend on the second Monday, from 4-6 p.m.; the employment office in Madras, on the third Wednesday, 1-4 p.m.; the Crook County Courthouse law library in Prineville, on the fourth Wednesday, 1-4 p.m.; and at the Family Resource Center in Warm Springs on the first Monday, 1-4 p.m.

Legal Aid lawyers are there to help, and the numbers show that help, in many forms, is desperately needed.

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