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### Legal Services project helps startups, nonprofits

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Victor Washington owns New Life Landscaping, a small company in the city of St. Louis. Stephanie Regagnon founded Ava's Grace, a St. Louis County charity to award college scholarships to individuals with a parent or guardian in prison.

Both Washington and Regagnon, and their respective entities, are among the beneficiaries of a new Legal Services of Eastern Missouri program, the Community Economic Development Project.

The idea, said project manager Laurie Hauber, is to provide legal assistance or education to low-income entrepreneurs who are trying to start a small business or grow their business and to nonprofit organizations that serve the indigent population.

"It's another way Legal Services as an organization can address poverty and try to address it in a systemic way," Hauber said in a telephone interview. "By supporting businesses in low-income communities that serve residents of those communities, you start to improve the well-being and overall health of a community."

Dan Glazier, LSEM's executive director, said there are many ways to fight poverty.

"We see this program as an important other element in our always-constant fight to help our clients survive and ultimately thrive," he said.

Stephen T. Skaff and other corporate and intellectual property lawyers at Lewis, Rice & Fingersh in St. Louis agreed to help Washington. Skaff practices in the areas of commercial litigation, mergers and acquisitions, banking and financial, corporate, real estate and public finance law.

Washington said the lawyer helped him register New Life Landscaping as a limited liability company with the Missouri secretary of state. Skaff also helped Washington draft invoices, proposals and an operating agreement.

Washington said Skaff taught him "the dos and don'ts for running a business and what can hurt you" legally.

Regagnon said she sought the assistance "to make sure our financial house was in order, our legal house was in order."

"Within a week and a half of putting together our presentation [to attorneys], a woman volunteered to be our new pro bono attorney," she said. The attorney is Nichole Y. Wren, of Gallop, who focuses on estate planning, tax-exempt organizations and business succession planning for privately held businesses.

James H. Guest, who manages LSEM's Volunteer Lawyer Program, said the project gives transactional lawyers — "people who are not courtroom-oriented but business-oriented" — an opportunity to do pro bono work. Typically, LSEM calls on volunteer lawyers to represent clients in court, and that's something most transactional lawyers aren't comfortable with, he said.

Since the project began in October, 33 people have met the criteria and are receiving legal assistance, Hauber said.

Jennifer L. Schwendemann said lawyers at Husch Blackwell, where she heads the pro bono services department, have taken about a half dozen cases so far.

"It is definitely unique in that it serves the population that may not readily be served for this type of work and provides transactional lawyers an opportunity to get involved," Schwendemann said.

Clients are referred to the LSEM program through community organizations such as the International Institute, the Center for the Acceleration of African-American Businesses, Justine PETERSEN and Grace Hill, Hauber said.

Glazier said none of the money for this project comes from Legal Services Corp. but from "very targeted grants."

Hauber said the new funding sources include Bank of America, PNC Bank, US Bank, the Trio Foundation of St. Louis, Incarnate Word Foundation and the city and county development corporations.

The sources have contributed roughly \$135,000 for the first year to cover Hauber's salary, the salary of one half-time paralegal as well as overhead costs.

**Related story**



Victor Washington, right, and attorney Stephen Skaff chat Thursday near some landscaping work Washington has developed in West County. Washington received legal advice from Stephen Skaff, of Lewis, Rice, & Fingersh, through Legal Services of Eastern Missouri's new Community Economic Development Project. Skaff helped Washington with papers of incorporation. Photo by Karen Etschout

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