

# Unique Community Partnership Fills Legal Services Gap

By Ashley Lowe

In August of 2006, the Women's Survival Center of Oakland County unexpectedly closed its doors, ending its role as the principal provider in Oakland County of legal services for low-income clients facing domestic violence, loss of access to their children, or other serious family law matters. Through the leadership of the Oakland County Bar Association, Thomas M. Cooley Law School joined forces with Lakeshore Legal Aid to create the Family Law Assistance Project (FLAP). FLAP now provides direct representation to clients across a full range of family law litigation matters, through a hybrid law school clinic that combines staff attorneys and support staff employed by Cooley and Lakeshore, third-year law students working for academic credit, and pro bono volunteer attorneys.

In addition to regular, biweekly client intake hours at the Adams-Pratt Oakland County Law Library, FLAP takes clients referred by a network of other organizations, including Common Ground Sanctuary, Christian Legal Aid, HAVEN, Legal Aid and Defender Association, Southfield Legal Clinic, and the Salvation Army. Funding is provided by Cooley Law School, the Oakland County Bar Foundation, the Oakland County Bar Association, the Women's Bar Association, United Way of Southeastern Michigan, and, through the support of the Legal Aid and Defender Association, the Michigan State Bar Foundation.

## What FLAP Does

FLAP provides direct representation to low-income clients with family law and domestic violence matters in Oakland County. Most of these cases are custody or divorce matters, and the clients are either survivors of domestic violence, have been denied or

are at risk of losing access to their children, or have some other complicating factor in their situation, such as language barriers, literacy problems, and mental or physical health concerns. FLAP students, staff attorneys, and pro bono attorneys file divorce, custody, and paternity actions on behalf of clients and represent them in court in all related matters, including evidentiary hearings and trials before the family court.

FLAP's current program far exceeds the original plans for the project. Most clients access services by attending intake clinics at the Adams-Pratt Oakland County Law Library on alternating Wednesdays. At the intake clinics, clients meet with a student or a volunteer attorney who will gather facts about their case and provide legal advice, pro se assistance, or information and referral services. Students are supervised at all times by staff attorneys or Cooley faculty. When FLAP began these intake clinics, it provided services to 10–12 clients every other week and completed the clinics in about two hours. Now, FLAP provides services to approximately 35 clients every other week, and the staff and volunteer attorneys spend well over three hours at each clinic.

To ensure that clients can easily access its services, FLAP has partnered with a number of other organizations in Oakland County to serve those clients who cannot attend the intake clinics at the Adams-Pratt Law Library. Clients may attend evening clinics

at Common Ground Sanctuary or clinics on other days at the Legal Aid and Defender Association, Southfield Legal Clinic, Christian Legal Aid, or the Salvation Army. Clients referred from any of these organizations are considered just like clients who attend the FLAP intake clinics. By partnering with other organizations in the community, FLAP hopes to reach the most eligible clients in the manner that is most comfortable and accessible to them. In addition, clients with emergency needs can call FLAP's Pontiac office to speak to staff immediately.

FLAP also provides assisted pro se divorce clinics to clients with relatively simple divorce matters and no history of domestic violence. Attorneys and law students assist clients in completing Oakland County-specific divorce forms created by FLAP staff attorneys. Clients receive general advice regarding the divorce process and the family court. Clients are scheduled for a second clinic approximately six weeks later for follow-up and completion of their divorce papers. If clients have questions in the interim, they may contact FLAP's office for additional support.

In addition, FLAP provides attorneys to represent survivors of domestic violence at hearings relating to personal protection orders. FLAP works closely with HAVEN's personal protection order staff to ensure that survivors of domestic violence do not have to face their abusers in court alone.

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## Clients Served

Since its inception in October of 2006, FLAP has served over 1,100 clients in a variety of ways, including:

- 696 clients who received legal advice and assistance during intake clinics at the Adams-Pratt Oakland County Law Library
- 105 clients represented by FLAP staff attorneys
- 73 clients represented by Cooley clinical students
- 154 clients represented by volunteer pro bono attorneys
- 46 clients assisted in pro se divorce clinics

## Why FLAP Can Do So Much

FLAP has two full-time staff attorneys who carry their own caseloads and also oversee student caseloads. FLAP staff attorneys work with clients with complex custody disputes, short deadlines, or complicated cases that are likely to take excessive resources. Often, the staff attorneys must respond quickly to lethal situations to ensure that clients and their children are in a safe place and have whatever community support they may require.

FLAP employs a full-time office manager responsible for managing the pro se clinics and handling the many follow-up questions from clients who have been provided with advice and forms from the staff or pro bono attorneys in those clinics. The office manager also answers the phones, does emergency intake, and handles all the legal secretary and paralegal work for the project.

FLAP utilizes a full-time pro bono coordinator who recruits volunteer attorneys, places cases with attorneys, provides support for the attorneys and their clients, runs the intake clinics at the Adams-Pratt Law Library, and collects and reports the statistical information for the project.

FLAP also has an active panel of more than 200 attorneys who volunteer their time and family law expertise. These volunteer attorneys provide advice to clients

at the library intake clinics and direct representation to clients. Since October 2006, these attorneys have donated 450 hours of their time at FLAP clinic intakes and 1,764 hours in direct client representation. The total value of this donated time exceeds \$445,500. The generosity of these lawyers makes FLAP possible.

Finally, FLAP has third-year Cooley law students who agree to work in the clinic for two semesters and attend classes addressing both the substantive legal issues and the practical issues of representing low-income family law clients. Besides interviewing and advising clients at intake clinics, each student has his or her own caseload and is responsible for everything from the initial client interview to drafting pleadings and appearing in court under staff attorney supervision.

Cooley's mission is to prepare its graduates for entry into the legal profession. One part of fulfilling this mission is a requirement that every Cooley student participate in one of the school's clinical programs or work in one of the school's many externship placements. The FLAP clinical experience, including client interviewing, document drafting, and courtroom exposure and experience, is a critical component of a Cooley education, and has the added benefit of helping students internalize the value

of pro bono service as a lifelong professional commitment.

Students participating in FLAP make the transition from law student to student lawyer and learn the primary importance of zealous and ethical client representation. Students who have completed their two semesters have described it as "The best experience of my law school career," "A great learning experience," and "A chance to put everything I have learned in law school into practice and help people at the same time."

*Author's note: An initial article reporting on FLAP's work was first published in the November 2007 issue of Laches, a publication of the Oakland County Bar Association. ■*



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