

A Personal Approach

By Lynn Patrick Ingram

Lansing attorney Kimberly Jones saw a gap and set out to fill it. She recognized the abundance of legal services available to those who can afford them and the availability of free legal services for indigent criminal defendants. But she wondered about those in the middle—those who aren't truly indigent, but can't afford full legal representation despite facing serious issues such as divorce, child custody, and foreclosure.

So she started a nonprofit law firm and began serving this overlooked and underserved population of clients. Like any good coach, she takes a personal interest in her clients, encourages them to take ownership of their cases, and collaborates with them until they reach the finish line. This allows her clients to get everything they need at a much more affordable price.

Jones recently spoke to me about her unique approach.

Tell me about your practice

The firm is called Collaborative Legal Services. It's incorporated as a nonprofit corporation under the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act. It provides general legal services—mostly family law, wills, landlord-tenant, and contract work. There is also some immigration work. In addition, I'm on the Michigan Appellate Assigned Counsel System roster, so the firm handles indigent criminal appeals as well.

"Future of Law" is a regular column of the *Michigan Bar Journal*. Articles about lawyers who are innovating the practice of law are written by Lynn Patrick Ingram. To submit a story idea, please contact Lynn at lingram@michbar.org.

Education is another important component of the mission, so community legal education is also offered. In the past, I've done workshops on individuals' rights in a traffic stop and what constitutes racial profiling by law enforcement. But these workshops are provided to support law enforcement. The curriculum is designed by Street Law, Inc. and is recommended to be provided in tandem with law enforcement and attorneys.

How and why did you come up with the idea to start a nonprofit law firm?

I've been an academic, teaching in higher education, for almost 20 years. In fact, I've been a full faculty member at Washtenaw Community College since 2002. In my capacity as an educator, I've had numerous students encounter life problems that could be eased with the advice or services of an attorney. They inspired me to go to law school, but it was always with the idea that I would practice public-interest law.

I took a law office management course while in law school at Cooley, and we were

required to create a business plan. I began researching nonprofit law and found a firm in Utah that inspired me. Then I researched the law in Michigan and realized that I could incorporate as a nonprofit. The rest is history.

How does it work and what sets you apart from a traditional practice?

It's all in the name. This firm provides collaborative services. I work with clients to determine the best course of action, but I involve them every step of the way. Limited-scope representation is a big part of the process. In fact, I encourage clients to take as much ownership of their cases as possible. With my educational background, I can coach them to do portions of the work themselves, thereby reducing costs.

How have clients responded?

My practice is new, but clients appreciate the ability to have control over their legal costs and be centrally involved in the development of their cases.

Kim's Top Tips

- Research practices in other states for cool ideas.
- Get a mentor who practices the same type of law.
- Read "Tipping the Scales of Justice: The Role of the Nonprofit Sliding Scale Law Firm in the Delivery of Legal Services" (available at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3040840>).
- Network with people on SBM's Affordable Legal Services Committee.
- Participate in the Limited Scope Representation listserv.



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— Lansing attorney Kimberly Jones

What else makes your practice unique?

The mission of the firm is to ensure that people who might otherwise be unable to afford legal services can have access. So it operates on a sliding scale fee for services. It also offers limited-scope representation, a relatively novel process because of the new ethical rules amended by the Michigan Supreme Court. And this type of firm doesn't only help clients. It also has the potential to help new lawyers. Because it's a nonprofit, any attorney working full-time for the firm would qualify for the public service student-loan forgiveness program.

Can you provide an example of how your approach has helped a client who might not have benefitted from a traditional law firm?

The personal approach to providing legal services is key. My clients are real people with real-life problems, and I feel humbled to be in the position to help them. I do my best to make sure my firm helps to change their lives for the better.

For example, I had an appeals case where the client wanted me to help transfer his probation out of state upon his release. His wife had left him because of his addiction and incarceration, and he felt like his presence in his son's life was unnecessary. But I strongly advised him to stay in the state, moving his probation to another county where he could start fresh but still be around to raise his son. He has been released, lives in an adjacent county, has a job, and is seeing his son. I've helped him determine how to move forward with securing parenting time with his son using tools from Michigan Legal Help. And I am working on appealing the conditions of his probation to increase the quality of his life.

Do you believe your approach is part of a growing trend? How do you see it fitting into the traditional legal landscape?

I think this model is the wave of the future. There is a dearth of legal services for the people who need them most. There are free services for the truly indigent in criminal cases. But there is *nothing* for those in the middle and those involved in civil disputes. The law doesn't provide a free attorney in civil cases. But losing all your property or your children in a divorce is devastating. Individuals shouldn't have to navigate that process without an attorney just because they have less income than others.

To be honest, I believe this model of providing legal services is just the beginning of changing the way these services are delivered across the board. Clients are more able to be involved in their own cases. Attorneys can truly counsel their clients and help them move their cases forward. People who never thought they could afford an attorney will have access and a better opportunity to be successful with their cases.

What would you tell other lawyers who might be interested in trying what you're doing?

Be bold. Try something new. Decide to use your knowledge of the law to make a difference in people's lives. Nonprofit law has a new face. Make it yours. ■

Lynn Patrick Ingram, Esq., is publications development manager and legal editor at the State Bar of Michigan.

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