

Firm offers low-cost legal services

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HOLLY HILL - Low-cost legal help has come to Ridgewood Avenue, marked with a sign that offers divorce document preparation starting at \$150.

Advocate's Legal Clinic, a private law firm based in Deltona, has opened a satellite office with a sign out front that says "attorney document preparation" for bankruptcy filings starts at \$450.

Costs are extra.

"What we want to do, is make sure everyone has access to legal services," said Jamie Jessup, a paralegal and spokesman for the law firm. "I am not an attorney," he quickly added.

His boss, attorney Michael L. Boswell, supervises all document preparation and provides traditional attorney representation as well. The firm's arrival comes at a time that is tough for law firms and consumers alike.

The numbers of people seeking legal help, who can't afford to hire attorneys, are booming as bankruptcies and foreclosures swell. Employment figures, meanwhile, look bleak. Money is tight.

Jessup wouldn't say how much of the business is divorce and how much is bankruptcy. But others say bankruptcies are keeping lawyers busy.

"Divorce numbers are far down," Larry Glitzman, public relations manager with Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida said. "Because people can't even afford to live apart."

Meanwhile, he said, foreclosures and bankruptcies have increased.

Jessup said the firm provides discounts on its services for anyone who makes under \$100,000. "Anyone making less than \$15,000 a year gets a 50 percent discount," he said. "We give them a choice of the level of service they want."

As a result, Jessup said, the firm has seen a number of people come in who were turned away from Community Legal Services because of limited resources.

Community Legal Services - where volunteer attorneys help people who can't afford a lawyer - once turned down two people for every one it could help. The organization now turns away three for every one helped.

"Free services are only available so much," Jessup said. "So we try to meet the gap between the people who can receive (free) services, and the people who get nothing."

Of course, as some private divorce lawyers say, you get what you pay for.

"I actually think it's smart, from a business standpoint," attorney Bradley Sherman said Tuesday. "I think it's fair game. If someone wants to go in and get a petition for dissolution of marriage and walk out with a form they can file, so be it."

If someone wants more involved representation, which Boswell also provides, they're going to pay \$175 or much more an hour.

"Bottom line, I think it's a good idea," Sherman, who has offices in Port Orange and Orange City, said. "But people need to educate themselves about what they need."

Sherman, who divides his practice about evenly between criminal and divorce representation, said his fees are on the "low side," starting at \$175 an hour.

"I do everything I can to make the clients understand what to expect from day one," he said.

Of course, some people just aren't comfortable going to lawyers for help.

At Community Legal Services, Glitzman said staff held workshops and created a reduced-fee panel to deal with the increased demand of people seeking legal help for financial problems. The agency handles about 9,000 cases a year, and has income requirements for some services.

"They can take the client we can't," Glitzman said. "The person in the middle."

Tips For Hiring An Attorney

KNOW WHAT YOU NEED: Get an idea of what it will cost you; every case is different. It's important that your attorney identifies what he can and cannot control. Your attorney should clearly describe the best and worst scenarios.

KNOW YOUR STRATEGY: Many civil and family cases are unpredictable so your lawyer should lay out a clear plan of action before you pay him or her any money.

KNOW YOUR ATTORNEY'S EXPERIENCE: Know specific experience your lawyer has in handling a case like yours.

KNOW IF THERE ARE PROBLEMS: Has the attorney ever been disciplined by The Florida Bar? Visit The Bar's Web site at floridabar.org

SOURCE: The Law Offices of Sherman & Souto

Photo

(Ran in West Volusia edition) The law firm at 248 Ridgewood Avenue in Holly Hill promises to handle divorces and bankruptcy for a price everyone can afford.

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