

Articles

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By Sean Groom
Washington Lawyer

Courthouse *Pro Bono*

Two projects of the D.C. Bar *Pro Bono* Program offer alternatives to traditional *pro bono* representation, while improving access to justice for District residents.

On a rainy Tuesday in March, litigants shuffle into Building B of D.C. Superior Court headed for the landlord and tenant branch. At 9 a.m. roll call, the courtroom's benches are full and late arrivals seek out the room's back corners.

Dressed in suits and carrying reams of files, the landlords' attorneys are easily identified in the first few rows to the judge's left. The remainder of the seats are filled with hundreds of litigants who are overwhelmingly African American, appear to be from the ranks of middle- or low-income earners, and with few exceptions are unrepresented. These are the tenants-young women alone, older couples, and a few families with fidgeting young children. Some clutch their documents wrapped in plastic shopping bags, but most do not have any supporting papers.

One woman, absorbed in her handheld video game, never looks up during the morning proceeding. The others, however, shift in their seats, trying to get a clear view of the bench and strain to hear every word of the judge's opening statement. The concern in the room is palpable-most believe that their housing status is going to be determined for them on this day. Most find the proceedings confusing, and their lack of understanding adds to their anxiety. The fact that many of the landlords are represented by attorneys increases their uneasiness.

During her opening statement, the judge tries to ease some of the apprehension by explaining how the day will proceed and delivers a quick overview of the litigants' rights. She stresses that a landlord's attorney is not a city official or employee and that tenants are not required to talk to the other party's attorney. Litigants, she says, can take advantage of several resources at the court. On this particular Tuesday, she tells the crowd, the new Landlord Tenant Resource Center can answer their questions, whether they are tenants or landlords.

Just down the hall, two attorneys and a legal assistant from Arnold & Porter LLP sit with D.C. Bar *Pro Bono* Program supervising attorney Mark Herzog, who are all waiting to answer questions of *pro se* litigants and explain their legal options. After roll call the tenants and landlords begin trickling into the office, asking the legal assistant if this is where they can talk to someone about their case.

A few hours later, across the square in the lower level of the Moultrie Courthouse, three other volunteer attorneys gather in a small office and ready themselves to answer questions of *pro se* litigants appearing in family court. At noon the first customer of the day walks through the door

and, in a scene that is repeated nearly 200 times each month, one of the volunteer attorneys sits down with her to discuss her case and offer some guidance.

The attorneys in the Landlord Tenant Resource Center and the Family Court Self-Help Center participate in the District's newest *pro bono* projects, coordinated by the D.C. Bar *Pro Bono* Program, which is funded by voluntary contributions and grants. For unrepresented litigants, the centers offer possibly the only real resource available to them so they can proceed better informed and better prepared. For attorneys, the centers offer an alternative to providing traditional *pro bono* representation. For the court, the centers improve the administration of justice for District residents unable to afford representation.

Self-help centers are springing up at courts around the country as the judiciary seeks ways to help the increasing numbers of *pro se* litigants. Ensuring that unrepresented individuals understand courtroom procedure and their legal options is important to improving access to justice and maintaining faith in the legal system among those unable to afford representation.

Volunteer attorneys now help to fill a tremendous need at Superior Court. The family court and the landlord-tenant court are overwhelmingly populated with *pro se* parties. Attorneys at the two resource centers do not provide representation or even legal advice; rather they dispense information about the law and procedure, and help litigants understand the options available to them. On one level, they might be considered ambassadors for the judicial system.

Family Court Self-Help Center

The Family Court Self-Help Center began as a pilot program in November 2002. The idea was developed with the court by a group of family law practitioners who, from their experience, saw a need to provide assistance to *pro se* litigants. The need for such a resource, according to Judge Lee Satterfield, who presides over the family court, is obvious. "We have a very high rate of families that come in that cannot afford attorneys," he says.

In fact, about 75 percent of the cases filed in the domestic relations branch are *pro se*. In the 2,000 paternity and support cases filed annually in Washington, 90 percent of the respondents are unrepresented.

Nancy Lopez, cochair of the D.C. Bar Family Law Section when the self-help center was proposed, says there seems to be a growing gap between the number of litigants who qualify for *pro bono* representation and those who can afford their own attorney. "There were lots of people with domestic relations cases who needed a little bit more help or direction and guidance than what the clerks in the clerk's office could give," she says. "There are people from the Legal Aid Society and other places that would give some people full-fledged representation, but they couldn't help everyone. So there was a gap where people needed a little bit of guidance and direction to get things filed and make things move smoothly for them, the clerks, and the court. We thought we could facilitate things for a lot of people by providing that little bit of help."

Meanwhile, family court practitioners experienced the effects of the large number of *pro se* litigants. The most obvious place that unrepresented litigants turned when they had questions was the clerk's office. As a consequence, attorneys found themselves waiting in long lines to file

papers. Not only was the lawyer frustrated, having to wait behind several litigants trying to determine what forms they required and how to fill them out, but the litigants and clerks also found the process aggravating.

When a litigant asks a clerk questions about her case, the clerk is put in a compromising situation. The clerk likely knows the answer to the question and would like to provide good customer service, but clerks are not allowed to dispense legal advice. For the *pro se* litigant, this just adds insult to injury. She does not understand the system and the court's representative cannot answer her questions. Because they do not understand the system and cannot get satisfactory assistance, unrepresented litigants often lose confidence in and develop hostility toward the justice system.

In reaction a group of family law practitioners began working with the family court on a planning committee to set about proposing a resource center for the court. On behalf of this group, Margaret McKinney, of Delaney McKinney Clark LLP and a member of the D.C. Bar Family Law Section, and Valerie Despres, family law supervising attorney of the D.C. Bar *Pro Bono* Program, wrote the proposal and officially submitted it to the court in October 2002. The court promptly signed off on the idea. Almost immediately the two sponsoring groups—the D.C. Bar Family Law Section and the D.C. Bar *Pro Bono* Program—started holding meetings to work on setting up their envisioned center, and they were soon joined by a coalition of interested parties, including the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia and the Women's Bar Association Foundation, Steptoe & Johnson LLP, and the family court. Within a month the center was operational in a twice-weekly pilot stage.

The timing of the center proposal could not have been better. As a result of the congressional scrutiny that produced the Family Court Act of 2001 and created a new family court within D.C. Superior Court, the court was inclined to look at its operation and, as mandated by the act, seek ways to make it accessible to the District's citizens.

Judge Satterfield says, "One of the things that the Family Court Act indicates is that we should do things to make this court family friendly, and provide information that is understandable and accessible to the families that come into this court, and [the self-help center] is consistent with that. . . . It was very timely that they came up with this proposal."

In addition to volunteers providing information to unrepresented litigants, the center also offers sample *pro se* pleadings and forms with easy-to-understand instructions. The center's volunteers often help litigants complete these forms in order that they may file a complaint for custody or respond to a child support action. Developed several years ago by the D.C. Bar's Family Law Representation Committee, these forms and instructions have become national models that address access-to-justice issues for *pro se* litigants. The committee is currently working on a new generation of sample pleadings that will be even more accessible to litigants and suitable for use on the World Wide Web.

The goal of making courtrooms more accessible to *pro se* litigants is not limited to the family court, however. According to Satterfield, one of the Superior Court's strategic goals is to provide easily accessible and understandable information to all self-represented individuals throughout the court's divisions. The proposed center clearly fits the bill, and the court gratefully offered

office space for the volunteers and equipment for the office. The court continues to be very supportive of the program, and has since been able to provide the services of a clerk. The goal is for the court eventually to staff the program rather than rely strictly on volunteer attorneys.

The center offers a range of support to *pro se* litigants. It serves as a reference depository with brochures and videos to explain issues, stockpiles of court forms and *pro se* pleadings, and information about and referrals to legal and community service providers. It also offers access to free seminars and workshops, and individual assistance from a volunteer attorney.

Currently, about 80 volunteers staff the center on Mondays and Fridays between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. and Tuesdays and Thursdays between noon and 4 p.m. Many of the volunteer attorneys have family law practices and each day the self-help center is staffed with at least one of these experts. But the majority of attorneys earn their money in other practice areas. All of the lawyers, however, participate because they believe there is a clear need for this service and find that it broadens professional and personal perspectives.

Monica Jahan Bose, an associate at Arnold & Porter LLP, responded to e-mail about the program from the firm's *pro bono* coordinator asking if she would be interested in volunteering at the center. In the past Bose had taken on two domestic relations cases *pro bono* and the firm's coordinator thought this might be a good fit. Bose attended a training session and thought the program seemed worthwhile, but initially had some reservations. "I have to say, the first time I went to the self-help center I was a little skeptical. Is this really the best use of my time as a volunteer lawyer? But after doing it a couple of times, I feel pretty strongly that it is a huge service, even if you are an experienced [domestic relations] attorney."

Bose practices environmental law concentrating on regulatory issues, compliance counseling, and litigation, but she has gained a knowledge of domestic relations law through her volunteer activities. While working in Arnold & Porter New York office, she volunteered at Sakhi for South Asian Women and counseled battered women on their legal options. One of the immigrant women she met at the counseling center asked for help attaining a divorce and Bose ended up representing her in a divorce action against an abusive husband with U.S. citizenship.

Bose learned a great deal about domestic relations law in the process and came away with a perspective on family law from the viewpoint of unrepresented litigants. "It's very hard and it's very complicated," she says, "for nonlawyers to navigate the system. . . . The courthouse is pretty intimidating. There are a lot of helpful employees there, but it's still intimidating [to *pro se* litigants], with a lot of different lines and different forms."

Of course, *pro se* litigants do not choose to be unrepresented. They cannot afford to hire an attorney, and this inability creates an access-to-justice issue. "It's very expensive to hire a lawyer for a divorce, and some people can't afford it," says Bose. "It's a real problem here in D.C., where we have a large low-income population."

According to Nancy Lopez, many visitors to the center "are people who make too much money to qualify for a *pro bono* attorney, but not enough to hire their own attorney, and are trying to figure out the system by themselves."

The system is geared toward those with specialized knowledge, and Bose has come to believe that this should not be the case. Bose, who is very passionate on the issue of access to divorce, has found that the procedural nuances of the court can stand in the way of people ending a bad relationship. For instance, a husband filing to get a divorce needs to give a copy of the filing to his spouse and must present signed paperwork that the divorce papers were served. Many people unfamiliar with court procedures fail to document this properly.

Says Bose, "There are so many people that need a divorce in D.C. and can't afford to have a lawyer. You should not have to pay a lawyer if you don't have any complicated issues. You should be able to get married and divorced on your own without having to spend a fortune. It's really a human right!"

Unfortunately, it is not just the two adults seeking a divorce who are affected by *pro se* missteps in family court. The children's quality of life is also at stake. According to those who volunteer at the center, family court litigants using the center are most often looking for help trying to get child custody, amend a visitation agreement, or modify child support payments.

Matthew Pavuk, of Johnson & Pavuk, is an experienced family law practitioner and one of the attorneys who volunteer at the Family Court Self-Help Center. As the family law expert when he is at the center, Pavuk serves as an information resource for the other attorneys in addition to counseling visiting litigants. By leveraging his expertise, the center is able to recruit many more volunteer attorneys to effectively assist *pro se* litigants. Recently, several of the city's most prominent domestic relations law firms have committed to providing expert mentors, like Pavuk, on a regular basis.

However, helping *pro se* litigants often is just a matter of assisting them to fill out forms, and significant family law expertise is not required. Says Pavuk, "They know what they want, but the forms are a little bit daunting, even though they were designed for *pro se* litigants. A lot of times it is just a matter of giving them the right name for what they are trying to do and suggesting a path for them to follow."

During the session with a *pro se* litigant, the attorney gains a glimpse of the person's life and problems. However, the attorney seldom knows how the situation is resolved. These moments can prove somewhat unsettling for the attorney.

Monica Bose knows the feeling. One litigant at the center sought to change her visitation rights through the court when she began to suspect her daughter was being abused. The woman entered the center to learn of her options and how different actions would affect her pending case and her daughter's life. Reflecting on that day, Bose says, "I remember that night, not being able to sleep and thinking, 'Oh my God, I wonder what she decided to do. I wonder what is going to happen to her little girl.' "

It is not unusual for *pro se* litigants using the center to return several times. Often litigants will use the center as a resource at each stage of their case to ensure that they have filled out the appropriate forms in the proper manner, to ask about legal options at a particular juncture, or just for some hand-holding from a trained lawyer.

Their response to this support has been highly favorable. "They seem very appreciative," says Pavuk. "The feedback is very positive and very thankful." In fact, the litigants are surveyed after using the center. One typical comment reads: "I was worried before coming here and did not know how to proceed with my matter. I now feel confident with the help and information I was given that I can proceed with getting my matter resolved."

The judges also appreciate the effect the center has had on improving *pro se* litigants' experiences with the court. Judge Satterfield says, "[Because] of the press of business in the court, even if everybody is doing their job right and being polite, there is still a certain amount of frustration that comes with lack of understanding, and the [self-help center] helps to bridge that gap that exists with the lack of understanding so that frustration levels go down."

Pavuk has seen litigants' frustrations and anger melt once they understand how and why to do things. "Many times, when people are angry, just being able to sit and calmly talk over the problem with them and try and steer them in a little bit different direction produces very, very good results."

Unrepresented litigants' praise for the center confirms Satterfield's and Pavuk's comments. After visiting the center, one relieved customer wrote on her survey form: "I understand now what was requested of me by the judge and all it took was talking to someone who understood the language."

Testimonials of this sort are all the justification needed for the self-help center in Satterfield's mind. "We are lawyers, and we have this legal way of doing things, but it is our job to help them understand the process, so at least if they walk away unhappy, it's not because they didn't get a fair shake and they didn't understand everything. They may be unhappy because the decision went against them, and that is not unusual in family law cases, but we want them to walk out feeling that they had a fair decision and that they had all of the information they could get."

Because the center succeeds so well in this aspect, the court is committed to continuing the program and eventually assuming responsibility for the center.

Although the court did not receive funding from Congress for the center in fiscal year 2004, it has requested funding for 2005, and Satterfield is hopeful that it will be granted. Once the money is appropriated, Satterfield says, the court will be ready to take over coordinating and supervising the center. "We've got the plans and we know the number of people we need and the level of experience [required]. That's all done and it's been taken care of for a while."

Landlord Tenant Resource Center

As in the family court, cases with *pro se* litigants dominate the landlord and tenant branch of D.C. Superior Court. Historically, the number of cases filed every week in this court is in the neighborhood of 1,000. Last year landlords filed 48,000 actions seeking summary eviction of tenants. In these cases over 99 percent of the tenants were not represented by counsel and about 14 percent of the landlords appeared *pro se*. For these litigants, regardless of the facts or merits of their cases, tenants without representation face a much higher likelihood of having judgments entered against them and inexperienced *pro se* landlords are at greater risk of having their cases dismissed, often because of procedural missteps.

The Landlord Tenant Resource Center grew out the recommendations of a 1998 report by the Landlord-Tenant Task Force, which was charged by the D.C. Bar's Board of Governors with identifying ways to improve due process and access to justice in the landlord and tenant branch. In November 2002 D.C. Bar president George W. Jones Jr. created the Landlord-Tenant Implementation Committee to put into practice as many recommendations of the task force as possible.

As at the Family Court Self-Help Center, volunteer attorneys in the Landlord Tenant Resource Center do not represent clients and do not provide legal advice. Their *raison d'être* is to help litigants without counsel navigate the system and understand the procedures that govern their particular situations.

The Landlord Tenant Resource Center opened its doors on January 13, 2004. During the pilot phase, which ran through March, Arnold & Porter staffed the center two days a week, helping to refine the center's operation. By April the center had demonstrated that it clearly met a substantial need in the landlord-tenant court and expanded its coverage to three days a week, with a fourth day every other week, thanks to additional teams of volunteers from Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP; McDermott, Will & Emery; and Perkins Coie LLP. As attorneys and legal assistants from other firms who have committed to the center are trained, including volunteers from Dickstein Shapiro Morin & Oshinsky LLP, Wilmer Cutler Pickering LLP, and Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP, the center will move toward providing services five days a week.

The vision of the committee is for the Landlord Tenant Resource Center to provide a range of services with a variety of resources for unrepresented litigants. And the court is quite eager to see this all happen.

According to Judge Joan Zeldon, deputy presiding judge of the civil division, "I literally begged the D.C. Bar [Landlord- Tenant] Implementation Committee to provide us help for litigants." From her experience in the courtroom, she found the need to be overwhelming. "There were many, many days in the landlord-tenant court where there was simply no one to whom the *pro se* tenants could turn for legal advice. There was an equally compelling need for *pro se* landlords who did not have lawyers, some of whom were very unsophisticated and would have benefited from professional advice as to how to proceed."

Besides providing an office, phones, and custom-built furniture, the court has worked closely with the D.C. Bar *Pro Bono* Program to ensure the center succeeds. According to Mark Herzog, "It's not unusual for Judge Zeldon to stop by the resource center a couple or few times a week just to ask how we're doing and whether we need anything. And if we need anything, you can bet she'll get it for us."

Zeldon is not the only judge to take an interest. "It means a great deal to the volunteers when judges visit the resource center after roll call and express their appreciation," says Herzog. "We know how thankful the litigants are, and how these services affect their lives. It's nice to see and hear how grateful the court is and what a difference it's making to them."

The plight of tenants in landlord-tenant court often justifiably receives sympathy, particularly in cases in which the tenant is faced with eviction for withholding rent in an effort to get the landlord to fix a leaky roof, turn on the heat, or provide hot water. It certainly makes a compelling story when this unrepresented tenant challenges an unscrupulous landlord who has representation. Volunteer attorneys are often surprised to learn how poorly some landlords maintain their rental properties. The tenants, time and time again, convey how disrespected they feel by their landlords for forcing them to live in such deplorable conditions. And they also express great appreciation for the courtesies extended to them at the resource center.

One elderly tenant on a fixed income who had complained to his landlord several times about his concern that the ceiling in his bedroom was sagging began withholding rent once it finally caved. After being sued by his landlord for nonpayment of rent, he visited the center and received assistance with completing an answer and preparing for his court appearance. When asked about his experience at the center, this tenant commented that he was "treated with great respect and a high degree of courtesy . . . [and] was shown much kindness." To someone who felt so dismissed by his landlord, this was terribly important. He also said he was "more than satisfied" with the services he received and was "very grateful."

Eve Runyon, a sixth-year associate at Skadden, Arps, witnessed firsthand "how difficult it is for litigants without representation to navigate the legal system" when she volunteered at the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia during a six-month rotation sponsored by her firm. On Runyon's first day at the center, she assisted a frustrated tenant who was being sued for back rent. The tenant had repeatedly complained to his landlord that his apartment had no heat, except for whatever was generated when he turned on his oven. Runyon was able to inform the tenant of his options, provide phone numbers for him to call to schedule a housing inspection, and assist him in filing an answer that stated his legal defenses. According to the tenant, "Ms. Eve was very thorough in answering my questions. . . . I believe the Resource Center is very informative. You should keep it open and staffed." Says Runyon of her experience, "Assisting residents to navigate our legal system when such a basic necessity-shelter-is being threatened is both worthwhile and challenging. Working at the resource center provides me the unique opportunity to learn and then share information about a field of law that impacts all residents of the District Columbia. The experience is extremely rewarding, and the services the D.C. Bar [*Pro Bono* Program] is providing are indispensable."

According to Judge Zeldon, there also is no shortage of moving cases of beleaguered landlords suffering at the hands of irresponsible tenants. "For example, a widow inherits a house," says Zeldon. "She takes in a homeless person for a mere pittance and she can't get him out. She needs the money to pay the mortgage, and she is very close to needing a conservator because she is very frail. People like that get terribly taken advantage of."

In fact, one of the surprises of the Landlord Tenant Resource Center is the number of *pro se* landlords who have sought help there. Herzog estimates that perhaps 20 percent of the litigants using the center are homeowners who rent out a room or a basement apartment and rely on the rent proceeds to cover their mortgages. For these litigants, their peace of mind rests on successfully resolving their case. The idea that they cannot remove somebody from their home

who has not been paying rent, with whom they now have a hostile relationship because they were unaware of a procedural step, frightens and angers them.

Jennifer Karmonick, a commercial litigator at Arnold & Porter, has volunteered at the Landlord Tenant Resource Center several times and helped quite a few *pro se* landlords who otherwise would have no other source of information on how to evict nonpaying tenants legally. Such assistance, of course, helps landlords understand their obligations, which in turn helps protect tenants from unlawful evictions.

For example, when Karmonick informed a landlord of the notice and service requirements for evicting his tenant, the landlord was "very satisfied" with the services received. "I have been frustrated to no end with this matter. Nevertheless, Jennifer listen[ed] to my issues and I feel gave me great assistance." This landlord is now much more likely to proceed legally to evict his tenant rather than just to throw her belongings on the street and change the locks.

Gregory Levine, a senior associate with Arnold & Porter and the firm's coordinating attorney for the resource center, supported by partner Philip Horton, was one of the first attorneys to volunteer at the center. Levine's practice focuses on pharmaceutical and medical device regulatory issues and related product liability litigation, but he has taken a few cases representing tenants through the D.C. Bar *Pro Bono* Program's Law Firm Clinic. He volunteered for the center, in part, because of what he observed in landlord-tenant court since interning with D.C. Law Students in Court. "As an attorney down there," he says, "you can't help but notice that there are lots of people there who are not being helped."

While sitting with his former client at the court waiting for their case to be called, Levine watched the unrepresented tenants meet with the attorneys representing institutional landlords. "A lot of times," he says, "the tenants will get in line and enter into agreements with their landlords' attorneys where they don't fully appreciate the consequences of what they are agreeing to or what their legal defense might be. They may have had a stronger bargaining position than they knew about."

Levine says it would be wonderful if all litigants in the court could have representation, but given the sheer volume of cases filed, it is not practicable. "If you can at least give everyone who walks in the resource center door some information to arm them and put them in a better position than they would be otherwise," he says, the center would improve access to justice and justify the time that he and other attorneys volunteer at the courthouse.

And sometimes information is all that people really need. One morning Levine simply helped an elderly woman understand that she was not in imminent danger of eviction. She had withheld rent to try to force her landlord to repair her apartment. Although she seemed composed when she arrived at the center, once she understood the status of her case and that she had various options to remain in the apartment and try to get her landlord to make the repairs, she began to cry. It became clear that she had been a lot more anxious and concerned than she initially appeared.

To supplement the services provided at the center, the information subcommittee of the Landlord-Tenant Implementation Committee has been working hard to generate sample pleadings for unrepresented landlords and tenants. According to Christine Ladd of Fannie Mae,

who chairs that subcommittee, "It has been heartening to witness the subcommittee's landlord attorneys and tenant attorneys working side by side, sometimes struggling but usually succeeding in coming to consensus . . . all in an effort to serve unrepresented litigants and further the administration of justice in landlord-tenant court. They are to be applauded."

In addition, a team of attorneys from Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, led by partner Douglas Robinson, was recruited by the subcommittee to develop self-help materials for pro se landlords and tenants for distribution at the center. The team spent literally hundreds of hours preparing these materials on everything from how to serve tenants with a complaint to how to pay a protective order. It is anticipated that the self-help materials will also be available in Spanish, and both the forms and materials will be accessible online.

Apparently, litigants are not the only beneficiaries of these centers. The volunteers themselves find the work personally and professionally rewarding. The chair of the Landlord-Tenant Implementation Committee, Kim Keenan, a senior trial attorney with Jack H. Olender & Associates, believes the Landlord Tenant Resource Center and the Family Court Self-Help Center are great opportunities for lawyers to gain client contact. "How can you be really good at your craft if you haven't had to actually interact with clients?" she asks. "I find that it doesn't matter who your client is. Clients, in many ways, behave with certain basic tenets: they need information, and they need people who can provide it to them clearly. I don't care whether it's a corporate client or a person off the street, that is true."

Levine says there is something special about helping in cases in which necessities like housing and family life are at stake. "Even though, as a senior associate, you might get a lot of client contact, there is still something different about client contact with a corporate client and client contact with a person who is in danger of being thrown out on the street, possibly unfairly, or a landlord who is just completely frustrated with the process and wants to understand it. There is something gratifying about that."

Perhaps this hunger for meaningful client contact explains why Levine has found that it is not junior associates, but mostly midlevel and senior associates, who have volunteered for the program along with the firm's managing partner.

Beyond understanding the basics of court procedures, the volunteers rely on their listening and communication skills. Although much information that the litigants want to share is irrelevant to the type of help the attorneys can provide, it can be important to understanding the issues. According to Levine, "Most of the time the people who come in don't know exactly what they are there for. They just want to understand the process better, and it is your job to get the conversation going in a direction that you get the information from them that you need so that you can then help them the best you can."

If the litigant has complicated issues that cannot be adequately addressed on a *pro se* basis, there are organizations to which the volunteers can refer them if they qualify. However, given the number of cases that come through the court, it is not possible for every litigant to receive *pro bono* legal counsel. According to lawyers who have worked at the center, the pro se litigants seem to understand this and recognize that the volunteers cannot act as their lawyer.

"I've been surprised by how appreciative the people are who have come in and gotten help from us," says Levine. "We are only giving them so much help, and we're explaining to them at the beginning that we are only going to give them so much help . . . but [afterward] they look you in the eye and they thank you."

Significant Impact

The Family Court Self-Help Center and the Landlord Tenant Resource Center have had a significant impact on their respective courts in a very short time. There is, of course, more work to be done as the Superior Court and the D.C. Bar strive to expand the coverage of these centers to five days a week and to other branches of the civil division.

The commitment of the court and the Bar to the growth of the centers appears firm. "The court has been very open and proactive in helping to make sure that things that could really get lost in bureaucracy don't get lost," says Kim Keenan. "There is no red tape to getting this help out to the community. The court is very focused on the fact that the people in the community really need some help with [*pro se* litigation], because if you have a problem in your family or you have a problem where you live, then you have a problem with your basic necessities of life."

Lawyers involved in providing help to *pro se* litigants find the process rewarding and praise the experience. Exposure to problems and concerns of customers of the Family Court Self-Help Center, says Monica Bose, "really makes you feel connected to real people in the city and their real problems."

The commitment of the volunteer lawyers helps improve access to justice for the District's poorer citizens and in doing so helps maintain confidence in the legal system. As one agitated *pro se* litigant said after having had his situation explained to him at the Family Court Self-Help Center, "I am relieved [and] no longer angry at the court system in the Washington, D.C. area."

Because the issues of divorce, child custody and support, and housing are so central to an individual's well-being and happiness, the effect a volunteer lawyer can have in only 20 to 30 minutes with someone in trouble is tremendous, and the litigants are appreciative as a consequence. Following the inaugural day staffing of the Landlord Tenant Resource Center, Levine wrote: "I enjoyed today and found it (re)invigorating to be out there talking to 'real' people. A couple of them came back to say thanks, which is something we very rarely hear from clients in corporate practice."