

SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

July 24, 2012

Getting help with legal costs

New program finds lawyers at reduced price



Dan Pelle photo

Moderate Means Program staff attorney Laurie Powers, center, helps Gonzaga University law student Andrew Ouimet use a statewide database that tracks case statuses. Student Paul Dec watches at left.

More info

Families or individuals interested in the Moderate Means Program can visit moderatemeanswa.org for information.

More info

Families or individuals interested in the Moderate Means Program can visit moderatemeanswa.org for information.

A first-of-its-kind program that pairs lawyers and law students to help middle-class families in need of legal work begins in Spokane this week.

Dignitaries including Washington Supreme Court Justice Steven Gonzalez, Gonzaga Law School Dean Jane Korn and Spokane City Attorney Nancy Isserlis will announce the program at a 10:30 a.m. event Wednesday.

The statewide Moderate Means Program is a larger version of an effort started a decade ago by young attorneys in Spokane, said Debra Carnes, spokeswoman for the Washington State Bar Association. The basic premise is to find attorneys willing to work with families who get up to 75 percent of their legal costs paid for as long as they meet income requirements.

“There isn’t a program exactly like this in the country, where the law schools are partnering with the state bar association,” Carnes said. “One of the things we hear is

that students come out of law school without practical experience. It's fulfilling that need as well."

Laurie Powers is assistant director for the Center for Law in Public Service at Gonzaga. Her half-time position, managing the Moderate Means Program, is being paid for by the state bar, which also funds similar positions at Seattle University and University of Washington law schools.

In turn, the universities provide computers, phones and volunteer law students who screen clients and connect them with a statewide list of more than 400 lawyers who have agreed to work with the program.

"There are a lot of people in crisis who need help," Powers said. The program helps "many people who didn't know where to get help or just assumed they couldn't afford it."

The program targets families who make between two and four times the national poverty level. For instance, an individual who makes between about \$22,000 and \$44,000 would qualify for 75 percent subsidized legal assistance on the low end and 25 percent on the high end.

"With so many people unable to afford legal assistance, programs like this provide great hope and meaningful access to justice where there was none, while enabling our judges to receive the information they need to make fair and just decisions," Justice Gonzalez said in a news release.

Law students receive the benefit of working with clients, some of whom have language challenges or mental health issues, to earn valuable experience, Powers said.

"We do all the screening and call a lawyer who already has agreed to take a reduced-fee case," she said. "They get to meet. Just like any lawyer or attorney client, they don't have to accept the case. And the client doesn't have to accept the attorney."

With students doing the legwork of finding attorneys, it frees up time for families already struggling with issues such as divorce, eviction or probate following a death. The students take calls, write up client interviews and enter them into the database, which is reviewed by Powers.

"They get the ability to hear these emotionally tough situations and figure out the help a lawyer can and cannot provide, which is important," Powers said of the law students.

Calls that come in from the West Side are routed to the two Seattle-based law schools and those east of the Cascades come to Gonzaga.

The program "allows young students to find their professional voice, keep deadlines and work with clients ... but in an environment that is being supervised," Powers said.