

## PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

April 24, 2013

### **GUEST OPINION COLUMN —Civil legal aid provides justice for all**

**Judge Rohrer**

By Erik Rohrer Clallam County Superior Court Judge

**(EDITOR'S NOTE** — *To protect their privacy, the people cited in this column have been given pseudonyms by the author.*)

Sophia, a domestic-violence victim, and her teenage son Jayden are about to lose their family home. Her husband — who is facing domestic violence charges — left the home and has provided no financial support since then. Sophia is behind on the bills, and their home is in foreclosure. Where can she turn to resolve her legal issues? Mia was severely injured as a teenager when she was struck in the head with a concrete block and has been in a wheelchair since the injury. Mia currently suffers from serious dental issues and is also extremely sensitive to many chemicals. She relocated to Sequim, in part, to access a dentist offering a chemical-free environment. The state Department of Social and Health Services refused to pay the dentist's bills because he is not on the agency's approved-provider list. The nearest dentist offering the services Mia needs is in Bremerton, and she has no way to get there.

What more can she do without being able to afford an attorney?

William lives in a federally subsidized apartment with his two sons, Noah and Ethan. Ethan was recently accused of assaulting a classmate.

The housing authority served an eviction notice on William based on the allegations of assault against Ethan.

William receives limited SSI income, but does not receive child support. He and his sons have nowhere else to live.

What is he going to do?

Local resources for low-income individuals with civil (not criminal) legal needs are very limited.

While Clallam-Jefferson County Pro Bono Lawyers does an outstanding job coordinating lawyers who volunteer to handle civil cases, the need is simply too great for volunteers alone.

That's where the Northwest Justice Project, or NJP, comes in.

The Port Angeles NJP office opened in 2007 with three attorneys serving Clallam and Jefferson counties.

Since then, budget cuts have reduced staffing levels to a single attorney struggling to serve the indigent civil legal needs of both counties.

And it gets worse: a \$3 million cut in funding for civil legal aid services under consideration in Olympia could force the outright closure of the North Olympic Peninsula's only NJP office as well as other offices serving rural communities across the state.

Any further reduction in state-funded civil legal aid would seriously impact the ability of indigent people to obtain access to justice — real people, like Sophia, Mia and William and their families.

As a result of NJP's intervention (including NJP's Foreclosure Prevention Unit), Sophia qualified for a loan she can afford to pay, Jayden will remain in the family home attending the same high school until he graduates and Sophia's former spouse will be required to pay child support.

Because of NJP's involvement, Mia has been approved to continue to see her dentist in Sequim. William and his children are still in their home because of NJP's representation. The court ruled that the housing authority did not have good cause to evict him. The allegations against Ethan were ultimately dismissed as well.

It seems only fair that folks like Sophia, Mia and William — and so many others like them — have reasonable access to legal advice and representation in civil legal disputes that affect their most basic needs.

The state budget should not be balanced on the backs of our community's most vulnerable citizens.

Civil legal aid in our state should be fully funded.

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***Erik Rohrer** is a Clallam County Superior Court judge and serves as chair of the bipartisan Washington State Civil Legal Aid Oversight Committee.*