
BLJ Editor's Notebook: Attorneys 'Say Yes' to free legal services

Apr 9, 2015, 9:00am EDT



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Editor/Reporter Buffalo Law Journal-
Buffalo Business First

When the Volunteer Lawyers Project of the Erie County Bar Association approached [Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman](#) about being part of a new initiative to provide free legal services to the families of Buffalo Public School students, the law firm accepted. But only on a limited basis, the firm said.

Then, after just the first training session by VLP representatives, Lippes Mathias decided to take on a larger role in the [Say Yes-sponsored](#) legal clinics. Members of the firm were so impressed with the program that as they walked out of the training, they began to talk amongst one another and questioned, "Why aren't we doing more?"

[Tom Gaffney](#), a partner in litigation, said it was then that the firm decided to take on responsibility for an entire school, providing a two-hour block of pro-bono services every week. Two attorneys — litigators as well as corporate lawyers — have been at each session since Jan. 20 when Say Yes started the free legal clinics four days a week in the [Buffalo Public Schools](#).

"There's been great support from the firm. All of the associates, as well as several partners, have come over to be involved. I've been over there a few times myself," said Gaffney after the ribbon-cutting ceremony on March 24. "It started out small for us and then we were like, 'Let's take this whole thing on.' "

Likewise, Hodgson Russ and Phillips Lytle have stepped up to staff clinics at area schools. And [Harris Beach](#) and [Hiscock & Barclay](#) participate in the program by sharing a day at one of the schools each week. [Gibson McAskill & Crosby](#) will soon join the effort, as well.

Legal advice is available from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m., Mondays through Thursdays, for non-criminal matters including adoption, bankruptcy, child custody, child support, divorce, eviction/foreclosure, government benefits, housing, immigration and income tax.

The clinics take place on Mondays at Dr. Antonia Pantoja Community School of Academic Excellence, 750 West Ave.; Tuesdays at South Park High School, 150 Southside Parkway; Wednesdays at Dr. George E. Blackman School of Excellence, Early Childhood Center, 2358 Main Street; and Thursdays at East High School, 820 Northampton St.

Say Yes-sponsored legal clinics are yet another example of area law firms and attorneys looking beyond their bottom lines, billable hours and serving larger clients.

"You can't learn unless you have an opportunity to learn in a good environment," said [William Brennan](#), a partner in civil litigation at Phillips Lytle and VLP board member for 10 years. "If we can help eliminate some of the legal challenges facing parents and guardians, at least that's a step in the right direction in helping these kids succeed in school. ... Buffalo is the City of Good Neighbors and that's what we're trying to do — be good neighbors."

Attorney [Joshua Feinstein](#), pro bono coordinator at Hodgson Russ, said the firm got a warm response from employees who want to be part of giving back to the schools and community. Many have made the time for it in their busy schedules.

"At first I was skeptical that we'd get a lot of people, but we've had dozens of people interested. At this point we have probably more than we can accommodate," said Feinstein, a partner in business litigation. "I'm personally overwhelmed by the positive response at our firm and I think it shows what kind of wonderful people are at our firm and how dedicated they are to the community."

Harris Beach and Hiscock & Barclay are no strangers to the initiative. The law firms got in on the ground floor as longtime participants in the Say Yes program of the City of Syracuse School District. It was the first districtwide program in the country.

Tracie Lopardi of Harris Beach said the firm helped spearhead the Say Yes education effort in Syracuse and when it heard the program would be stretching into Buffalo, there was excitement to once again become a partner. The firm finds great rewards in giving back to the community, she said.

"It's wonderful to be able to assist various individuals in the Buffalo community with whatever matters they might be going through. And as an educational institution's attorney, it's nice to give back in this particular manner," said Lopardi, who practices in labor and employment. "It's a wonderful opportunity to also partner with the Buffalo schools."

Robert Heary of Hiscock & Barclay said that continuing with the initiative, now in Buffalo, fit in well with the law firm's attempts to engage the Western New York community while providing added opportunities to work with VLP.

Over time, Heary said, each community's program develops its own network of support and means in which to operate. In Syracuse, the model has changed based on feedback and in an effort to increase the traffic, he said. Some of the clinics have been moved to community centers and run during non-work hours for parents who are busy with 9-to-5 jobs, he said.

"I'm sure this will be a process that will evolve over a period of years. We'll have more lawyers and firms that join and we'll be able to serve more and more people as the program expands," Heary said.

The Monday clinics at School 18 that are overseen by Lippes Mathias have been well attended so far, said Gaffney. The attorneys involved have found it to be satisfying to help those who show up and said they see several different cases at nearly every session.

At the recent ribbon-cutting, VLP director [Robert Elardo](#) said the clinics had been in session 28 days and 47 clients were served so far.

"They have a sense of empowerment and walk out at least with some confidence in how they'll face this problem," Gaffney said of clients. "The benefit for us is that it keeps us grounded because it reminds us of the real-world problems that people are facing versus us sitting in our office, helping some corporate client with a contract issue or with buying a business."

Brennan aims to help rectify clients' problems before they need to go to court. He said when his Phillips Lytle colleagues volunteer, he makes it a point to ask how it went and, typically, they're upbeat and encouraged. He said the firm has so many people signed up to volunteer that it probably won't get through the entire list during this academic year.

"I like to think of it as a snowball going down a mountain and getting bigger and bigger. I think that's what's going to happen with this," Brennan said. "I have no doubt that by the end of the school year, this will be a pretty hot program."

At a time when Buffalo Public Schools are under more scrutiny than ever, Feinstein of Hodgson Russ finds it refreshing to be talking about something that can help improve the situation.

"It's gratifying to have something highlighted about the positive things going on in the city and the school district," he said. "There are a lot of good people trying to make the schools work and we're thrilled to be able to contribute to that."