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IT'S NO JOKE: LAWYERS HAVE HEARTS

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In the attic of Holy Trinity Anglican Church at Hemlock and 12th in Vancouver, Allan Parker and a passel of volunteers toil in tiny, cramped offices trying to ensure the poor get legal help when they need it.

When groceries and rent are day-to-day concerns, hiring a lawyer is usually out of the question. Besides, many people aren't sure what their rights are or are intimidated by the legal system.

"Yet if their problems are unaddressed, they're going to have a lot of far more serious issues develop," explained Parker, who became an expert in foreclosure law on Vancouver Island during the recession in the 1980s.

"We're going to see a lot more of that."

Parker, the executive director of Access Justice, said his non-profit organization is providing more and more free services to meet the need exacerbated by the economic downturn.

"And I expect we're going to be busier than ever," agreed Bruce Fraser, QC, chairman of the board of directors.

While legal aid is guaranteed in almost all criminal matters, there is no similar support for the poor embroiled in civil or family disputes.

"But my message is hopeful," Parker added. "The profession is pitching in.

"I do interviews or speak in public and when I say this, there's a skepticism: 'Oh, lawyers are actually doing something for people?' It makes us bristle a bit. We know the lawyer jokes, but lawyers are doing a hell of a lot for the public."

Parker's right: Lawyers take a lot of flak over their bills and the inequities of the legal system, but they also contribute more than people realize.

Access Justice is an example -- a grassroots organization backed by more than 1,000 lawyer and non-lawyer volunteers.

There are others such as Pro Bono Law of BC and the Salvation Army's Pro Bono Program.

Established in 1990, Access Justice was initially created to research impediments to the legal system. It still does advocacy and outreach, but its main focus is pro bono -- free -- services delivered via more than 60 clinics across the province at which lawyers dispense summary advice to qualifying clients in half-hour, one-on-one sessions. The largest is held at the Vancouver Courthouse.

The clinics are the legacy of the late Dugald Christie, a tireless advocate for the underclass who was killed in the summer of 2006 bicycling across Canada to raise awareness of legal hurdles facing the poor.

Every year thousands who earn less than \$30,000 get help with anything from a speeding tickets or immigration hassles to a custody and contract aggravation. They can return four times and, if further work is needed, Access Justice hands the file to Pro Bono B.C., a sister organization that provides more intensive legal work for free.

"We're on the ground floor -- there's nothing lower," Fraser quipped.

Frequently, though, clients need a basket of services because they face multiple problems and the lawyers often do as much social work.

"We don't come second to anyone when it comes to holistic," Parker said.

Last year, more than 300 lawyers aided just under 4,000 people. Not bad on a threadbare budget of about \$300,000.

By early November, Parker said, the number of clients this year had sprinted past 4,000 and was headed upwards of 4,200.

From 2004-2007, the agency helped nearly 13,500 clients, half of them of Asian heritage. Of the rest, 37 per cent were Caucasian, three per cent Afro-Canadian and three per cent Latino.

More than half (54 per cent) astonishingly had an undergraduate education and eight per cent had gone to graduate school.

For more information visit: www.accessjustice.ca.