

Working out of the library, Maryland Legal Aid helps people grapple with issues only a lawyer can fix



City residents are receiving help with their civil legal needs through the Lawyer in the Library program at the Enoch Pratt Free Library. (Algerina Perna, Baltimore Sun video)



By **Yvonne Wenger** • Contact Reporter
The Baltimore Sun

Tyrone Burns was out of work and desperate when he saw the post on social media.

Maryland Legal Aid was offering free legal help at the Pennsylvania Avenue branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library. The nonprofit's lawyers could help him clear his record of old criminal charges.

It sounded too good to be true, but the 35-year-old West Baltimore man took the chance. He had been working as a sports coordinator for a youth program until his employer ran a background check that revealed several criminal charges. The program let him go.

At the Lawyer in the Library clinic, a Legal Aid attorney helped Burns scrub his record of six charges and three traffic tickets. Now he has a new job with a fitness program.

"I was surprised there was a service like this for free," he said. "It changed my whole outlook on everything. I feel like it is a second chance at life and careers I didn't think were possible at one time."

Maryland Legal Aid has stationed lawyers at three neighborhood branches of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, helping thousands of people resolve problems that have hounded them for years. Besides expungements, the attorneys offer legal advice on child custody, bankruptcy and wills and help accessing veterans' benefits and escaping domestic violence.

Organizations across the state have long offered free legal services in courthouses, churches and other public venues. Legal Aid has taken advantage of timing. Lawyer in the Library was born of the riots of 2015,

and just as changes in the law allowed people to expunge from their records years-old misdemeanors or criminal charges that did not result in convictions — marks that have blocked people from qualifying for subsidized housing, securing steady employment or being allowed to see their children.

Legal Aid attorney Amy Petkovsek, who helps run the program, said clients leave the clinics free of problems only a lawyer could fix. Some, in tears.

"An attorney can spend five to 20 minutes with one person here and literally change a life," Petkovsek said. "They can get a job. They can have access to housing or access to their children just with 20 minutes of an attorney's time. That is a really big deal."

Lawyer in the Library, part of Legal Aid's community lawyering initiative, has served nearly 3,600 people in the last two years. Hundreds showed up for some of the early sessions, and demand remains strong: Petkovsek says the attorneys often stay longer than they planned in order to get to everyone waiting.

One client told Petkovsek he was unable to get into subsidized housing because he had an old marijuana charge on his record. He said he and his six-year-old child were sleeping on the streets. After the lawyers were able to help him expunge his record, he called to say the pair was no longer homeless.

Petkovsek spoke of helping a mother remove six items from her criminal record, while the woman's toddler played with a ball by their feet.

"I said, 'After today, your record is going to look just like mine: totally clear,'" Petkovsek said. She said the woman, shaken and emotional, took her little boy's face in her hands and told him: "Honey, today you have a brand new mommy."

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Any charge on which the defendant was not convicted — because it was dropped or postponed indefinitely, or the defendant was found not guilty or given probation before judgment — may be expunged.

While most convictions cannot be shielded from public records, the law does allow the expungement of convictions for offenses that are no longer crimes, such as possession of marijuana. Certain misdemeanors — disorderly conduct, prostitution and trespassing, for instance — may also be scrubbed.

More than half of the clients who visit the clinics are seeking expungements, Petkovsek said. Another quarter want help with housing or family issues, such as custody, visitation agreements and divorces. The rest are looking for help with bankruptcies, tax sales, wills or public benefits, such as food stamps and unemployment insurance.

Legal Aid also visits five library branches in Baltimore County, and others in Hagerstown and Silver Spring, and plans to expand across the state.

Pam Sandlian Smith, a director of a library system near Denver, is president of the Public Library Association. She said lawyer-in-the-library programs are a relatively new concept that she believes will spread. She said such services are essential to the modern library that looks to help people in growing and innovative ways.

“Libraries traditionally were mostly about books and then information,” she said. “Now ... we’re becoming very proactive about helping our communities solve problems,” she said. “We want to be part of the solution and are asking, ‘How can we be a catalyst?’”

Bonnie Sullivan, director of Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service, said Legal Aid is following the trend of getting attorneys out into the communities, rather than waiting for people from underserved communities to travel to the lawyers.

“It’s a wonderful program and long overdue,”

Sullivan said. She said reaching all of the people who need civil legal services will take an assortment of solutions. Her organization, for instance, provides a cyber clinic for the Wicomico County library to help people there with expungements. The group’s pro bono lawyers are also pairing with churches, another trusted institution, to help families untangle challenges connected to estate planning that can sometimes span generations, she said.

Gusty Taler, Legal Aid’s chief operating officer, traced the decision to put the organization’s lawyers in the Pratt branches to April 2015. That’s the month that Freddie Gray died in police custody, and the city erupted in riots, arson and looting.

Legal Aid’s headquarters near City Hall was surrounded by protesters and National Guard troops. Inside, Taler said, the lawyers felt restless.

Taler saw the Pratt’s Pennsylvania Avenue branch manager on television talking about the decision to keep the library open, even as the West Baltimore intersection where it is located became the focus of the unrest.

“All around her was crazy chaos, and she said she was keeping the library open because it was a safe haven and people had come to rely on it,” Taler said. “I came up with the idea: Let’s put lawyers in the library.”

The Pratt makes the ideal partner, Legal Aid officials said. The library branches are built along public transportation routes and easily accessible corridors, and they’re known as trustworthy providers of important services. The Pennsylvania Avenue branch, for instance, provides Internet access and computer printers, help with job searches, grocery deliveries, and social workers who offer counseling services or help filling out disability forms.

The first clinics, held in September through December 2015, drew decent-sized crowds, Petkovsek said. Then, during the long weekend for Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January 2016, the program exploded. About 650 showed up that Saturday, and officials

directed them to a clinic scheduled the next day at a nearby church. More than 700 showed up for that one.

Petkovsek suspects that the outpouring was prompted by the program’s results. By January, she said, many of the first clients, from September, were starting to see their records scrubbed clean of old charges.

Lawyer in the Library has grown to employ four staff attorneys, two paralegals and an administrative assistant. Legal Aid did not divulge the program’s budget, but officials said the program spends about \$100,000 for the salary and associated costs of each attorney on the project. The organization has received grants from several groups to help pay for the program.

Petkovsek says other branches around the city and state are asking the lawyers to come to them, but the program will expand slowly as Legal Aid finds more funding to ensure it can make an ongoing commitment.

“Libraries are calling from all over the city and all over the state wanting to know: ‘When can you come to my branch?’” she said.

If you want to go

Lawyer in the Library clinics are held regularly at the Enoch Pratt Free Library and at libraries across the Baltimore area. For more information, call 443-451-2805 or visit mdl.org or calendar.prattlibrary.org. Sessions are free and no appointments are necessary. People are seen on a first-come, first-served basis.

Clinics are offered from 1 to 3 p.m. every Tuesday at the Pratt’s branch on Pennsylvania and North avenues in Baltimore. Other upcoming sessions include 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday at the Dundalk branch of the county library system, 323 Sollers Point Road; 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Dec. 14 at the Pratt’s Waverly branch, 400 E. 33rd Street; and 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Dec. 16 at the Orleans Street branch, 1303 Orleans Street.