

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

Volume 158, No. 148

Simon makes request for volunteer attorneys

BY **JERRY CRIMMINS**
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The lieutenant governor is looking for Chicago area lawyers willing to consult with a domestic violence victim for one hour only through a Web camera and Skype to answer questions.

"The lawyers can do it from their office, from their kitchen, wherever they have their Internet hookup," said Lt. Gov. Sheila J. Simon.

Simon's office calls this a "virtual legal clinic."

"I know some lawyers who would like to do pro bono work but are really afraid of something that's going to take up a huge chunk of time," Simon said.

"This is an ideal situation where a lawyer can say, 'I want to volunteer to take two phone calls a month,'" she said, or "Every Wednesday at 9 o'clock, I'll be available."

"We tell them that we don't represent them, and we're not necessarily giving them legal advice," said Sandra G. Quello, one of the lawyers who took part in a small, pilot project.

Quello is an attorney with Evans, Loewenstein, Shimanovsky & Moscardini Ltd.

"We're giving them advice in every part of domestic violence we can or in any part of their

legal issues we can, and tell them where they can go for more help," Quello said. "We're not legally representing them."

Typically, a victim who wants to talk to a lawyer in the virtual legal clinic has already gotten an order of protection, Simon said.

The Web cam session is about "How do I move on from here?" she said.

Martha Herm, executive director of The Center for Prevention of Abuse in Peoria, where the pilot project began, said victims "want information. ... It's not to represent them.

"They have questions about custody of children, property rights" — such as leases, mortgages, car titles that they might hold in common with a spouse or partner — "trying to maintain assets that might be due to them," or divorce concerns, Herm said.

Some questions also involve immigration law. "If someone is here on their husband's visa, but he's been abusive, are there ways to get off that visa and get your own?" Herm said. "You just need someone to kind of help walk you through the system and give you some of the options."

The program is particularly aimed at domestic violence victims in rural areas or underserved areas of the state, said Leslie Ann Reis, special adviser



Sheila J. Simon

to Simon for legal and legislative affairs.

"What we're hearing back from the (social service) agencies, especially in areas outside of Chicago was that survivors had limited access to legal information," Reis said.

This problem has grown more acute during the economic downturn as legal aid groups have financial problems, Quello said.

Simon was formerly assistant clinical professor at Southern Illinois University School of Law, where she founded the domestic violence legal clinic.

One of the lead items on Simon's agenda was to provide

legal assistance to domestic violence survivors, Reis said. It may have been Maria Capoccia, Simon's deputy chief of staff, who suggested, "Why don't we just do it over the computer?" Reis said.

Reis and Simon both said two of the needs for the virtual legal clinic are attorneys who can give advice on immigration law and bilingual attorneys.

If volunteer attorneys want training in domestic violence issues, the program will give it to them along with Continuing Legal Education credit.

Reis said the pilot program started with the The Center for Prevention of Abuse in Peoria and Pekin. It just expanded to the Crisis Center Foundation in Jacksonville. Simon wants to expand it statewide.

Through the help of the Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the pilot project in its early months worked out ethical rules, developed various legal forms including for conflict checks and worked out technological and privacy issues.

So far about 20 domestic violence victims have been helped.

Lawyers who want information or wish to volunteer can contact Mark H. Schauerte, general counsel to Simon, at (312) 814-3309 or mark.schauerte@illinois.gov