

Free legal options expand in Fox Cities

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Abstract:

At FVTC's clinics and the three in Winnebago County, volunteers from the college's Paralegal Student Organization and local attorneys help fill out forms and answer questions on issues of family law, landlord-tenant disputes, harassment injunctions, guardianship, small claims, domestic abuse, probate or wills and property disputes.

Full text:

GREENVILLE - Getting answers to legal questions doesn't have to cost a bundle -- or anything at all.

The addition of a free public legal clinic at Fox Valley Technical College brings the total number of such clinics to four each month in the Fox Valley.

On Saturday morning, FVTC kicked off a monthly clinic at its Appleton campus, 1825 N. Bluemound Drive. At FVTC's clinics and the three in Winnebago County, volunteers from the college's Paralegal Student Organization and local attorneys help fill out forms and answer questions on issues of family law, landlord-tenant disputes, harassment injunctions, guardianship, small claims, domestic abuse, probate or wills and property disputes.

The FVTC clinics add a weekend option to those already being held in Winnebago County three Tuesday evenings a month -- one each at the public libraries in Menasha, Neenah and Oshkosh. The addition of paralegal students, who do intake and help clients with paperwork, will free-up attorneys to answer attendees' legal questions.

"Typically if you're filling out a form, it takes quite a while to get through ... so if we can avoid that part of it and have that already taken care of by the paralegals, who are getting trained to do those things, then we can concentrate on giving advice that the clients need as well," Menasha attorney Michelle Angell told USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin.

The clinics give paralegal students a chance to put classrooms lessons to work and provide invaluable experience in working with clients -- so-called "soft skills" that they're going to need once they enter the field. How many people show up to each clinic can vary, Angell said, with the high end being 30 to 40. She recalled an instance when the clinic couldn't get to everyone who had attended and followed-up with phone consultations afterward. Most people come to the clinics with questions about family law, small claims and landlord-tenant conflicts.

The clinics fill an important need in the community, she said.

"It's a pretty big role because there's a large contingency of people that can't afford legal services and so they get a lot of their questions asked at the legal clinics that they might not be able to ask until they get to court and then we're clogging up the court system with questions that could have been taken care of and resolved outside of court," Angell said.

The four clinics together are now called the Fox Valley Free Legal Assistance Clinic.

The idea for a fourth clinic, in Appleton, got its start when FVTC Paralegal Program Director and Instructor Christine O'Brien and three students were on their way back from a conference in Madison. It seemed like every other program had a club or organization to supplement learning, but the paralegal program did not, they said.

The group created the Paralegal Student Organization but they needed a purpose. The students started volunteering at the Winnebago clinics, saw the service it provided and decided to bring the same service to Appleton, said Jeremy Schoenike, who founded the organization with classmates Anna McGraw and Toni Hasenfus.

"In our experience with volunteering at the other locations, we have definitely seen the need for this type of service, recognizing that there wasn't anything for the Appleton community," he said.

The organization's current students and alumni, plus volunteer attorneys, run the Appleton clinics while other volunteers are able to help at the Winnebago clinics. It was also important to the students that they continue volunteering at the other three clinics once the Appleton location got off the ground. They've created a schedule to make sure paralegal student volunteers will be there.

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Clinic schedule

The full list of clinic dates is available on the college's website by going to www.fvtc.edu/LegalClinics and clicking on "Fox Valley Free Legal Assistance Clinic."

The Tuesday clinics are held from 4 to 6 p.m. The Saturday clinics take place from 9 a.m. to noon. Attendees are asked to bring paperwork associated with their cases.

Saturday (Usually first Saturday of the month, but dates vary. Check FVTC website to confirm dates): FVTC Appleton campus, 1825 N. Bluemound Drive

First Tuesday of the month: Menasha Public Library, 440 First St.

Second Tuesday of the month: Neenah Public Library, 240 E. Wisconsin Ave.

Third Tuesday of the month: Oshkosh Public Library, 106 Washington Ave.

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