



**Judge Colleen A. Falkowski**  
**Lake County Court of Common Pleas- Domestic Relations Division**  
**House Ways and Means Committee**  
**Proponent Testimony- HB232**

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Scherer, Ranking Member Rogers, and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bill 232.

The cases which come before me as Judge of the Lake County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division, are all civil cases. They include divorces, dissolutions, domestic violence civil protection order petitions, and post decree motions, including, but not limited to: reallocation of parental rights and responsibilities; enforcement of child support orders, and modification of spousal support.

Over the last few years, increasing access to justice for the lower-income population has been a priority of the Ohio Supreme Court's Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor. For example, in the domestic relations area, uniform forms were developed for each type of case to assist the pro se litigant in filing and following through on a case. These forms remain daunting, however, for individuals with limited reading ability. These individuals are a large part of the lower-income population the Court serves.

The Domestic Relations Court and the Lake County Bar Association, Family Law Committee have partnered with the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland since October 2013 to provide a quarterly legal clinic for pro se residents. The clinic's purpose is to assist lower income residents who reside in Lake, Geauga, and Ashtabula Counties in filing for a divorce. The clinic is staffed by volunteer attorneys from the above-mentioned counties. Since its inception, over 4 ½ years ago, our Legal Clinic has had a phenomenal success rate of over 90% of the participants securing a divorce. The Clinic has also maintained outstanding continuing participation from the volunteer attorneys.

The volunteer attorneys spend about three hours at the Court for each Legal Clinic. Further, most of our volunteer attorneys are solo practitioners, who bill in a range of \$200.00 to \$450.00 per hour. Therefore, three hours of billable time would be anywhere from \$600.000 to \$1,350 in the office. Granting the income tax deduction for time spent volunteering through the Legal Aid Society would certainly be of benefit to self-employed attorneys throughout the state. Also, the deduction may encourage Legal Aid participation for self-employed attorneys in rural communities where the caseloads are not as high.

Family law is the area the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has the greatest need for volunteer attorneys. Although the volunteer attorneys can earn capped continuing legal education credit for pro se legal services provided through a Legal Aid Society, I respectfully submit HB 232 legislation will be of greater benefit to encourage volunteer attorneys to assist in civil litigation. Foreclosures continue to be a significant issue for the lower-income population who

literally do not know where to turn when served with pages of legal documents the person cannot even begin to follow.

The Court has been fortunate in our partnership with the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland to provide necessary family law legal services to lower-income families through our quarterly clinic. The bill recognizes the important contributions an attorney makes to this underserved population. Passage of HB 232 will energize Legal Aid Societies throughout Ohio to develop more clinics staffed by volunteer attorneys in civil cases. More importantly, this legislation will indeed make a positive difference in many of our constituents' lives. I wholeheartedly support HB 232.

Thank again you for this opportunity.