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Athens Access to Justice Initiative: Judicial Leadership + Bar Support + Local Resources = Powerful Synergy

Eleanor Lanier
Associate Dean for Clinical Programs and Experiential Learning & Mediation Clinic Director
University of Georgia School of Law, eclanier@uga.edu

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Athens Access to Justice Initiative: Judicial Leadership + Bar Support + Local Resources = Powerful Synergy

Through the Athens Access to Justice Initiative, Hon. Regina Quick is providing a helping hand to members of her own community.

BY PROF. ELEANOR C. LANIER

One thing Superior Court Judge Regina Quick is most passionate about is access to legal services for the poor. She knows first-hand how poverty affects children and families. Growing up as the daughter of a coal miner in rural Alabama, Quick saw how education and a helping hand could change a person’s path in life. Through the Athens Access to Justice Initiative, Quick is providing that helping hand to members of her own community.

In 2017, Quick became the first woman appointed as Superior Court judge in the Western Judicial Circuit, which covers Athens. She wasted no time marshalling local resources to fulfill her long-time dream of providing support to those in the community who cannot afford legal help. She convened a steering committee consisting of local bar leadership, the managing attorney of the Athens office of the Georgia Legal Services Program and faculty representatives from the University of Georgia School of Law. The end result was the establishment of the Athens Access to Justice (AATJ) Initiative, a local effort that builds upon efforts of the State Bar Pro Bono Resource Center and the Bar’s Access to Justice Committee, led by Hon. Jill Pryor.

(Left to right) Hon. Regina M. Quick, Superior Court, Western Judicial Circuit; Rep. Deborah Gonzales (D-Athens); Hon. Susan P. Tate, Athens-Clarke County Probate Court; Karaline Farmer; and Debra M. Finch, Debra M. Finch, P.C., Athens.
Pop-Up Legal Clinic

In December 2017, the AATJ hosted its first pop-up legal clinic at a public housing community center in Athens. Members of the local bench, including Quick, were on hand to explain the operations of their respective courts. Volunteer lawyers provided free legal advice and limited scope assistance or referrals to those in need on a wide range of topics, including family law, landlord-tenant, expungements, etc. The clinics “pop up” at various locations in the community once a month to make it easy for those who need help to reach the clinic.

The response from the local bar has been overwhelming. Dozens of attorneys have donated their time and resources to this initiative. Word has spread about the clinics within the community and the number of people at each clinic continues to increase.

Debra Finch is one of the volunteer attorneys with AATJ, the current chair of the Western Circuit’s Family Law Section and a founding member of the steering committee.

“At the last clinic we had 25 people from the community seeking help within the first 25 minutes of opening our doors that day. The numbers have continued to grow,” said Finch, an adoption attorney and child advocate in Athens. “People come in with questions, often stressed out about their situation, but after spending one-on-one time with an attorney and discussing their options, their relief is palpable.”

Finch said one man had come to the clinic to help complete his uncontested divorce. He had been to court 11 times for a final divorce hearing, but was turned away each time because he did not have a Child Support Worksheet. After conferring with one of the volunteer attorneys, this individual left the clinic on Saturday with his child support worksheet in hand, and was able to resolve his divorce the following week.

Clinic visitors are welcomed by members of the local bench who explain the role that each of the courts plays in our system. Representatives of the clerk of superior court are available to answer questions about filing fees and procedures. Participants are asked to complete a brief information sheet about their legal problem or issue. They are then directed to a table for a free consultation with an attorney who has expertise in that area of law. There is a portable printer and a notary available for forms completion, and packets of commonly requested forms are available on site, as well. Model Rule 6.5 helps avoid the need for extensive conflict checks and linking with the Georgia Legal Services Program to serve clients who are eligible for their services but cannot be served by their office provides insurance coverage for volunteers who handle cases that the program cannot take.

Volunteers and visitors to the monthly pop-up clinics feel the strong sense of community spirit that underlies this initiative. Breakfast and coffee are available for visitors and volunteers and Due Justice Do 50. mugs, T-shirts, bags and bumper stickers are available to visitors and volunteers alike thanks to the State Bar’s Access to Justice Committee. In addition to the bench and bar, volunteers include law students, paralegals and undergraduate students who have an interest in law. The number of volunteers and clinic visitors has grown with each session.

Self-Represented Litigant Center

The second aspect of the AATJ Initiative is a self-represented litigant center in the Athens-Clarke County Courthouse. The center occupies the space that housed the law library and was recently renovated with the support of the law library board and court administration to be a more inviting community space where self-represented litigants can obtain forms and assistance understanding court procedures. This project has been several years in development.
Beginning in the summer of 2016, two post-graduate law fellows researched successful self-help office models in Georgia and interviewed judges and clerks to learn more about the most common questions and problems raised by pro se litigants. They then developed forms packets and FAQs to address common problems and after review by local judges, this material was posted on the website.

The effort was expanded by University of Georgia School of Law students under the direction of Clinical Prof. Ellie Lanier, who directs UGA Law’s mediation practicum. The students this semester worked as “court navigators” for credit under the supervision of Lanier and alongside a local volunteer attorney. Visitors to the self-represented litigant center get one-on-one assistance from the center facilitators.

Court facilitators do not provide legal advice or representation but can assist visitors with locating forms and they point them to helpful material and explanations. The center currently is staffed one day each week, and plans are underway to add lunch hour staffing by local pro bono attorneys. There is a conference space in the self-help office that can be used for clinics and guided instruction in common problems, and explanatory material and videos are being added continually to the center and website by law students who work in the center under the supervision of law school staff and volunteer attorneys. Data from the center including the nature of the problem and source of the referral will help inform future efforts. Visitors who need more help than the center can provide are referred to local attorneys with expertise in the area of law needed and who have agreed to accept cases from the AATJ Initiative.

Consolidated Pro Se Docket
The third component of the initiative is a consolidated pro se docket, developed and managed by Quick. This docket includes a listing of all cases where one or both parties are unrepresented and contains cases that have stalled, typically for procedural reasons. Law student navigators under Quick’s guidance identify the procedural barrier presented by each file and contact the unrepresented party to notify them of the status and missing documents in the file. They are then invited to attend the next pop-up clinic or visit the self-represented litigant center. Navigators report back to the court about the status of these efforts.

While more remains to be done, under Quick’s leadership and with support of the bench and local bar, self-represented litigants have increased access to justice and service from the court, law students have an opportunity to work alongside and learn from local attorneys to help those in need and our local office of the Georgia Legal Services Program has partners in service to help expand their reach and impact in the community. For more information on the Athens Access to Justice Initiative, please contact Hon. Regina Quick at regina.quick@accgov.com; Debbie Finch at debbie@debrafinch.com, or Prof. Ellie Lanier at eclanier@uga.edu.

Eleanor C. Lanier
Clinical Professor and Director, Mediation Practicum
University of Georgia School of Law
eclanier@uga.edu

Endnote