

# Lawyers help at homeless shelters

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NEW ORLEANS — Clayton Hines didn't think anyone could help him when he walked into a tiny office at the Harry Tomson Center at Immaculate Conception Church in New Orleans.

He had just gotten out of jail and had no home. A truck driver whose license had been suspended, Hines faced \$3,000 in fines and penalties on tickets someone else accumulated after stealing his car.

Within a few weeks, he had his license back and the traffic court problems were resolved, courtesy of JoAnn Johnson, a lawyer with Adams and Reese who volunteers her time at homeless centers.

Johnson is one of several lawyers from 15 New Orleans area law firms who provide free services at the Tomson Center and the St. Joseph Center. Organized by U.S. District Judge Jay Zainey, the program started in May and is getting high marks.

"It means a lot to have lawyers in here that can perform legal triage," said Don Thompson, the Tomson Center's director. "They can come in here and handle a lot of these issues quickly, and then they hand me their card and it expands the reach of what I am able to do when the guys here come to me with issues."

The top issue in the program's first two months is that many homeless people lack proper identification. "We have found that often-times their identification may get stolen or taken by the police in an arrest," Zainey said. "And many homeless shelters will not accept people for the night if they don't have photo identification."

After meeting with officials from the state Office of Motor Vehicles, Zainey started a sister program with more than 150 lawyers who officially stamp copies of photo IDs.

"The OMV has allowed us to notarize a copy of the homeless person's identification and leave that on file at the center where they first registered," Zainey said. "Then, if their photo identification is lost or stolen, they can simply return to the center and pick up that copy."

The OMV has agreed to consider that notarized copy sufficient proof of identity and will issue a new ID from that copy. The New Orleans Police Foundation, through a grant, is reimbursing the homeless centers for the cost of the replacement ID.

"Can you imagine how difficult it is to prove who you are when you are homeless?" Thompson said. "You need a birth certificate to get a new identification, but you need identification to get a birth certificate. This service will help solve a lot of problems."

The service is expanding quickly. It now is available at five area centers and shelters, and Zainey is working with lawyers in Alexandria, Baton Rouge and Shreveport to bring both programs to homeless communities in those cities.

But Zainey said his idea is not totally new.

"We have a lot of great groups in New Orleans that provide legal representation for the poor, but one of the big problems with much of the homeless population is that they don't know that many of these options even exist and where to access them," Zainey said. "So my idea was just that we would bring some of this help to them."