

# Free legal **HELP**

New volunteer project providing legal assistance to those in need

By Dann Denny

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A low-income man recently went to the Project HELP legal aid clinic because he feared for the safety of his young son, who was living with his ex-wife in a house filled with drug use.

Within a week, a volunteer attorney at the clinic had helped the man acquire full custody of his son.

Not everyone who visits the clinic has such a happy outcome, but all who go there do get free legal assistance from professional attorneys.

The clinic, which is open from 1 to 4 p.m. each Friday, is housed in the Trinity Episcopal Church. It's open to those who are homeless or who can't afford legal help. So far, it's served about 180 individuals, about 30 a month.

"The need of people living in poverty for legal services has been well chronicled nationally," said Joel Rekas, executive director of

the Shalom Community Center, which has been running the clinic since May. "Poor people usually have trouble getting good access to the legal system."

Rekas said Project HELP (Homeless Experience Legal Protection) mirrors the Volunteers in Medicine model, which uses local professional health care providers on a rotating basis to treat patients for free.

The Project HELP clinic enlists about 50 local attorneys — plus 30 Indiana University law students — who work at the clinic on a rotating basis.

Tom Bunger of Bunger and Robertson is one of 15 members of the Bloomington

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**JACOB ATZ**, one of two Indiana University law students coordinating Project HELP

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law firm who regularly help people at the clinic. He remembers a man who was distraught because he'd been arrested on a drunken-driving charge in Illinois and had lost his commercial driving license.

Bunger told him whom he needed to call and what paperwork he needed to submit to get his license reinstated.

"He wanted to get his license so he could get off the streets and back to being a productive member of society," Bunger said.

Jacob Atz, who coordinates the clinic with fellow IU law student Blair Johnson, said people ask for legal help with child support and custody issues, medical problems, employment problems and housing issues.

"But far and away, the No. 1 issue is landlord-tenant problems," Atz said. "A lot of people are trying to avoid being evicted, and we've been able to help many of them prevent that from happening."

Rekas said the clinic is being funded with a \$15,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Bloomington and

Monroe County, which is being used to cover the cost of Atz and Johnson to develop and coordinate the clinic.

Rekas said the two coordinators received an abundance of helpful advice and technical assistance from Indiana Legal Services, a nonprofit agency that provides free legal services to the poor and elderly.

"Those people at Indiana Legal Services are gods to me," Rekas said. "But the legal needs of the homeless and low-income population are far beyond what any one entity can meet."

Rekas said the clinic gets most of its help from two large law firms — Bunger and Robertson; and Mallor, Clendening, Grodner and Bohrer.

"We're trying to recruit more attorneys," Rekas said. "In the future, we'd like to expand our coordinator position from half to full time, and by spring we'd like to open the clinic a second day each week."

Rekas said he's excited to see how well the clinic is working.

"It's wonderful to see all these local attorneys donating their time," he said. "This is one of the best things we've done in some time in terms of a new initiative."