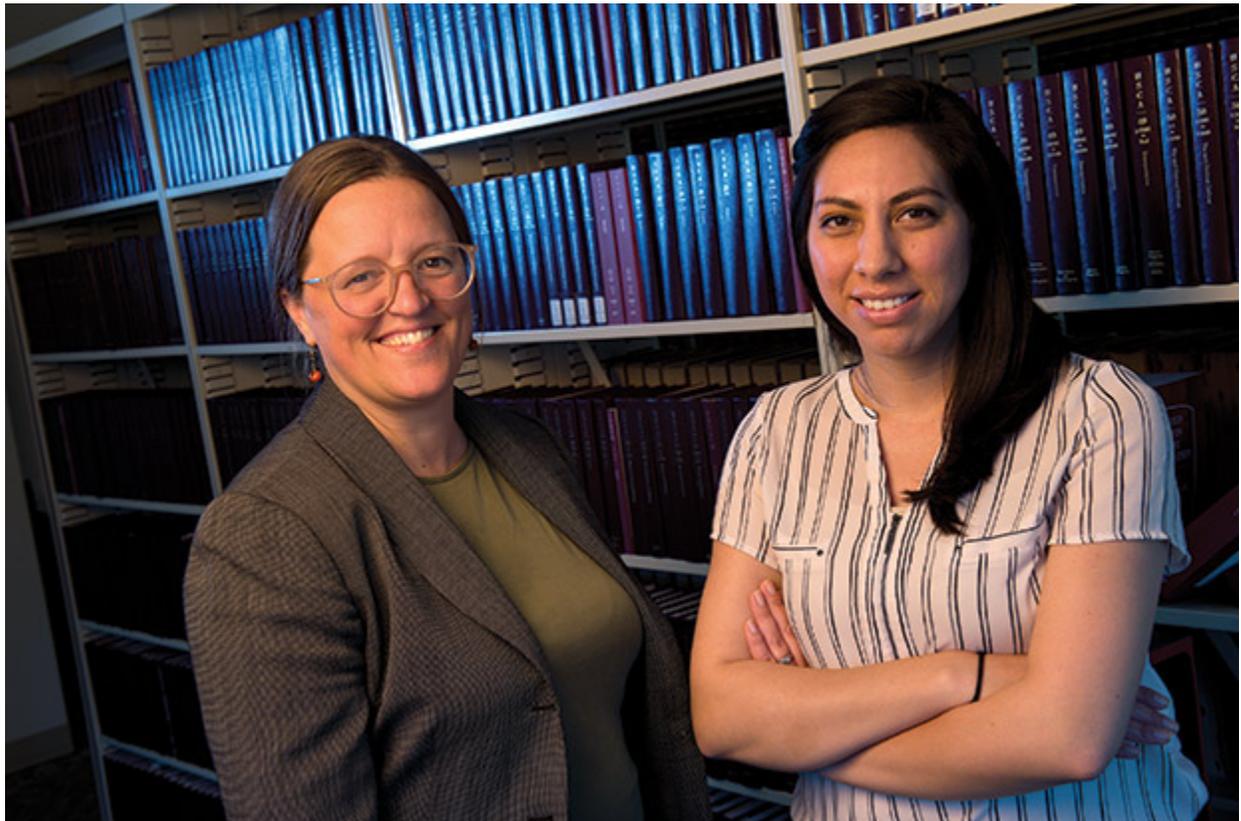


Public-interest firm seeks volunteers to help bring down evictions in Dane County

By: Erika Strebel, erika.strebel@wislawjournal.com May 28, 2018 8:00 am



Attorney Heidi Wegleitner (left) and paralegal Rebeka Pritchett of Legal Action’s Dane County Eviction Defense Project work from the library of the Dane County Courthouse on May 8. (Staff photo by Kevin Harnack)

Matthew Desmond may have studied Milwaukee County in his book “Evicted,” but it isn’t the only place in the state with high eviction rates. Every year, close to 2,000 eviction notices are filed in Dane County. That number might seem low, especially when it’s compared with the more than 12,000 eviction filings that Milwaukee County sees each year. But once Dane County’s smaller population is taken into account, the difference becomes far less apparent, said Deedee Peterson, associate executive director of Legal Action of Wisconsin.

Peterson said she thinks more attention should be paid to evictions in Dane County. “There has not been as much publicity around local research that’s happened on this,” she said.

Legal Action of Wisconsin is looking to fill that need. Months after it started the Milwaukee Eviction Defense Project in response to Desmond’s book, it embarked on a similar undertaking in Dane County in late January. Like its Milwaukee counterpart, the Dane County Eviction Defense Project is meant to give tenants meeting certain qualifications better access to lawyers by involving the private bar through pro bono work. It takes advantage of recent Wisconsin Supreme Court rule changes that expand lawyers’ ability to provide limited-scope representation and allow certain pro bono legal work to count for continuing-legal-education credits.

Wegleitner, who has practiced eviction defense at Legal Action for 12 years, said lawyers there cannot by themselves fill the need for legal representation in eviction court. “You win the lottery if you get a lawyer because our capacity is so limited,” she said. “Trying to add capacity through the involvement of the private bar has proven really successful in Milwaukee ... We know of the tremendous need to have legal representation in eviction court and the difference that an attorney can make in the outcome that a tenants can achieve. We’re trying to replicate that here in Dane County.”

Wegleitner, her paralegal Rebeka Pritchett, and the project’s volunteers do their work every Tuesday in the lower level of the Dane County Courthouse. Eviction court is held on the same day from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.; cases are called at different times. Volunteers sign up for or as many or as few shifts as they want, and an experienced housing-law attorney will remain on hand throughout the day to supervise and answer any questions.

In its first three months of operation, the Dane County Eviction Defense Project helped 61 households and volunteers logged 125 hours of legal services. Those volunteers so far have ranged from young lawyers, lawyers from large firms to experienced lawyers. “We’re seeing a lot of diversity and experience and practice areas,” Wegleitner said. “It’s a great way for folks who don’t have much experience litigating to get some experience in small-claims court.”

Peterson and Wegleitner stressed that the project has two important partners. One is the Tenant Resource Center, which provides free information about housing and related matters to all Dane County residents. “We’re fortunate that the Tenant Resource Center is also at the Dane County Courthouse because they have staff who are there who have funding to provide some housing counseling but also financial assistance,” Wegleitner said.

The other partner is the University of Wisconsin Law School’s Neighborhood Law Clinic, which provides free information as well as legal representation in some cases. The clinic has taken some cases to trial for the project. In the short term, the project’s goal is to train a panel of lawyers who can represent clients at their trial dates, Peterson said. One current priority is to get clients representation on their first appearance date. But in the longer term, one of the project’s goals is to ensure that every low-income tenant who faces eviction in any Wisconsin county has legal representation.

“These are traumatic, life-altering events – legal problems – and the only way to navigate those is by having legal aid to help you,” Peterson said. “People who go into these traumatic, life-altering civil legal problems without a lawyer never fare well. It is not OK to be in eviction court without a lawyer.”

## Get trained this summer



Lawyers interested in volunteering for the Dane County Eviction Defense Project can attend a free training session from 9 a.m. to noon June 6 at Husch Blackwell’s Madison office, 33 East Main Street, Suite 300, Madison, WI 53701. Heidi Wegleitner, an attorney at Legal Action of Wisconsin, and David Sparrer of Herrick & Kasdorf will be presenting information. The session is expected to count for three credits of continuing legal education. Anyone who plans to attend must register by June 1. Those who can’t make it but are interested in volunteering should call Wegleitner at 608-620-2002 or write to her at [HMW@legalaction.org](mailto:HMW@legalaction.org).

Copyright © 2018 The Daily Reporter Publishing Co. | 225 E. Michigan St., Suite 300, Milwaukee, WI 53202