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Salvation Army opens legal clinic

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By KANIQUA DANIEL SMOTHERS
Of The Oakland Press

PONTIAC City leaders in Pontiac were joined by prominent members of the law community Thursday as the Salvation Army Eastern Michigan Division opened the second location of its William Booth Legal Aid Clinic.

The Salvation Army Pontiac Corps on Oakland Avenue is home to the new clinic, which provides free legal services to southeastern Michigan residents living at or below the poverty level.

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More information "I'm happy to see something like this being offered in our city," said Pontiac Mayor Clarence Phillips. "This is really a blessing for those who are less fortunate and may not be able to obtain the legal services that they need."

The brainchild of Bloomfield Hills attorney Robert Dickman - a graduate of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law - and his wife, Ellen, the first William Booth Legal Aid Clinic opened in Detroit in 1994.

The Pontiac facility is intended to help residents who are struggling financially, for whom finding transportation to Detroit can be a burden, said Ellen Dickman.

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"We've always provided these services to residents," she said. "Having a facility in Pontiac makes the service even more advantageous for people living in Oakland County."

Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca added: "It's important that every citizen has access to the legal system, regardless to their financial situation. Those who can not afford such services now have them right here in Pontiac."

Robert Dickman said his vision for the clinic began in the 1960s, when he began his career working in urban law clinics.

"Back then, we were working with people who actually needed the help," he said. "By teaming up with the Salvation Army, we can also provide social services to our clients with everyday needs."

The clinic offers assistance in the areas of family law such as divorce, child custody, child support and guardianship; wills; landlord and tenant legal counsel; general advocacy; public benefits and entitlements. Two attorneys and three law students have been assigned the Pontiac office.

"The important thing is to keep the avenues of our justice system available to all residents," said Circuit Court Judge Fred Mester. "But this service really helps everyone involved. First, the individuals who are in a legal posture. But it also helps the profession of law by providing law students with real-life experience. For the lawyers who volunteer their time with the clinic, this is their opportunity to give back."

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