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Pro Bono Eviction Defense SWAT Team Expands

Attorneys Jeanneane Osborne and Matthew Johnson from Devine, Millimet look on as Judge James Leary provides a view from the bench regarding landlord-tenant cases in district court. Chair of Devine Millimet's Pro Bono Committee, Johnson also heads the new Pro Bono initiative Swift Working Attorneys for Tenants (SWAT) Team at the firm. An active member of the SWAT team, Osbourne has helped five clients facing eviction since the project's inception in April.

By Joceline Champagne, Pro Bono Referral Program

New Hampshire attorneys have a history of providing service through the Pro Bono Referral Program in a variety of different ways. One area of the law in which members of the Bar have continually answered calls for help is eviction defense. A family facing eviction is often a family in crisis and the ramifications of an eviction can be far-reaching. The importance of legal counsel to advocate on behalf of a tenant in an eviction action is obvious. However, with the quick turnaround of these cases within the courts and limited resources available to meet the existing need, many tenants journey through the process representing themselves and simply hoping for

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the best.

Over the past year, Pro Bono joined forces with NH Legal Assistance (NHLA) and the Legal Advice & Referral Center (LARC) to develop a new model of providing services on an expedited basis in eviction defense cases. The SWAT (Swift Working Attorneys for Tenants) Team was born as a result of the collaboration. Pro Bono launched the new program as a pilot project at the Devine Millimet law firm in Manchester.

In April 2006, associates at Devine Millimet participated in a training session about the basics of landlord-tenant law and eviction defense. Since the training, the attorneys have been providing emergency assistance to tenants facing eviction. Key components to the program's success are the attorneys' commitment to respond quickly and the system in place to provide the attorneys with the information and support needed to respond on such short notice. Given the project's initial impact and the feedback from the community, the decision was made to expand the effort to reach beyond Greater Manchester and include attorneys and tenants in other parts of the State, particularly in the Nashua and Concord areas.

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In November, the second SWAT Team training was held at the NH Bar Center in Concord. Ten attorneys from the Concord, Nashua, and Manchester areas attended the seminar, which was led by experienced legal service providers: Attorneys Lynne Parker and Chris Wellington, of NHLA, and Attorney Tom Fredenburg of the LARC. In addition, the group was provided with a perspective from the bench by Judge James H. Leary of the Nashua District Court, as well as from the bar by Attorneys Matthew Johnson and Jeanneane Osborne of Devine Millimet.

Thank you to all who have helped with the development of and participated in the SWAT Team project. We are already seeing the positive results of your efforts. Those without a voice in our justice system are given one with the help of legal counsel to advocate on their behalf. In addition, cases in which tenants are represented by counsel often result in more dialogue between the parties and negotiated agreements in which both sides have a say in how the case is resolved.

If you have any questions or are interested in learning more about the SWAT Team project, contact Attorney Joceline Champagne of the NH Pro Bono Referral Program at 603-715-3262 or at **jchampagne@nhbar.org**.