

Living

JEWISH

There's legal aid aplenty for needy Jews

REPORT

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Local Jewish poor affected by strike

RABBI YECHÉZKEL PIKUS has a problem on his hands — Jewish poor and elderly who need free legal help.

The place he usually sends them — the Joralemon Street office of Legal Services in Brooklyn, the only office of the government-funded Legal Services for New York City with a mandate to serve Jewish poor — is closed, its attorneys on strike.

"Just today I had three referrals," said Pikus, executive director of the Council of Jewish Organizations of Flatbush. "One was a case relating to different dimensions of separation and child support. Another was a Medicaid denial problem, and the third was a housing situation.

"I told them that, unfortunately, I don't have any legal services and that I will try to obtain help for them."

Attorneys and clerical workers at the Joralemon Street office are among the 250 Legal Services employees of Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan and the Bronx who went on strike April 1 asking, among other things, for wage increases to put them on a par with other public law firms. The staff has been without a contract since December.

Legal Services provides free counsel to those who cannot afford to pay for legal help. It is funded through the next two years by federal, state and city monies and is not affected by the current fiscal crisis, according to union spokeswoman Martha Raimon.

She said the Joralemon Street office was set up in the 1970s to serve the Jewish elderly and poor. Today, ac-

cording to striking attorney Scott Sommer, the office counts Yiddish-speaking elderly and Russian-speaking Soviet emigres among its clients.

It is the only Legal Services office "with a specific mandate to reach out to Jewish people," according to Rabbi David Cohen, executive director of the Metropolitan New York Coordinating Council on Jewish Poverty.

"Seventy-five percent of the cases are rental related," said Cohen, who is on the Board of Legal Services for the Jewish Poor, which supervises the Joralemon Street office. "We might have a lot of people evicted."

"For those people who have housing problems, with eviction notices — generally the elderly — the strike will have a very bad effect," said Rabbi Shlomo Braun, director of the Council of Jewish Organization's social services department in Borough Park. Braun is telling clients "to go to the Brooklyn Bar Association, which has attorneys who will help people for a nominal fee."

Pikus said he was planning to use "pro bono [free] help from attorneys in the community, but that is inadequate to handle our clientele." He estimated that his office alone refers at least eight to 10 cases a week to Legal Services.

No one could be reached at the Joralemon Street office, but a tape-recorded message informs callers that due to the strike, no new clients can be helped. Two management attorneys are available, however, to help current clients.

—Toby Axelrod

Starting next month, the group will take matrimonial and child custody cases. It will handle landlord-tenant disputes "as soon as we have more attorneys," said Schulman.

Meanwhile, he added, "service to the homebound is a priority for our organization. If [clients] can't come to us, we go to their homes."

Schulman said he expects more potential clients as a result of the strike by the Legal Services Staff Association, a not-for-profit organization that provides free legal service for people with low incomes.

Many striking attorneys work at the Brooklyn Heights office of Community Action for Legal Services, a government-funded agency supervised by the Board of Legal Services for the Jewish Poor.

Most cases handled by the striking lawyers are in the areas of housing, family law and disability, said spokeswoman Martha Raimon.

Legal service agencies under Jewish auspices include Queens Legal Services for the Elderly, funded by UJA-Federation's Jewish Association for Services for the Aged, known as JASA, and the New York City Department of Aging, and the Bet Zedek legal clinic at Yeshiva University's Benjamin Cardozo Law School.

At Bet Zedek, second- and third-year law students provide free services to elderly and disabled individuals who cannot afford a lawyer — mostly in the areas of government benefits programs such as Medicaid, Social Security and disability in-

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