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Kirby Mitchell, managing attorney at the Greenville office of South Carolina Legal Services, says there's a huge demand for free legal aid. (PATRICK COLLARD/Staff)

Legal Services faces big demand in tough times

Agency helps low-income clients with civil matters

*By Lark Reynolds
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There are a lot of jokes floating around about lawyers. But there are times when their assistance is invaluable in dealing with things that most certainly are not laughing matters, such as when a tenant faces unfair eviction.

Legal expertise, though, generally comes at a price that low-income residents of the Upstate can't afford.

That's where South Carolina Legal Services comes in. The Greenville office sits right in the heart of the West End, and opens its doors to low-income individuals who need legal help in civil – not criminal – matters.

"It's a huge range of things," said Kirby Mitchell, managing attorney at the Greenville office. "We do a lot in Family Court, in tenant-landlord cases, consumer bankruptcy, elder law and tax cases."

The office's eight full-time attorneys keep active caseloads in a variety of areas, but each does have a specialty, such as housing or consumer bankruptcy. Clients walk in the door seeking help with problems ranging from divorce to eviction, and everything in between.

"There's just a constant demand for free legal help, as you can imagine," Mitchell said.

Each potential client goes through a rigorous screening to verify his or her eligibility for the free help provided by S.C. Legal Services. That screening checks income, any potential conflicts of interest, and citizenship. Following its completion, a potential client is interviewed.

“Each week we meet and discuss all the cases and make a decision on each case, whether it's within our priorities, or something we feel like we need to help on, where we can make a difference,” Mitchell said.

Unfortunately, there are always too many cases to accept them all.

“About half of the really legitimate requests for help are denied or not met, just due to the limited number of staff we have,” Mitchell said. “The demand, unfortunately, is far surpassing the supply of legal aid lawyers. And that's always been the case, and it's always been our struggle.”

If that's the downside, the upside is seeing the difference the legal staff can make in the lives of the clients the agency can help, Mitchell said. It's the kind of work young, idealistic law students dream of.

“They think, ‘I want to stand up to the jury and help the woman who is facing a lynch mob in her trailer park,’ or ‘I want to help the 90-year-old woman living alone who's being robbed by her adult daughter on drugs,’” Mitchell said. “This is the kind of thing we do every day. We're able to change those lives for people faced with losing a job or a house or a child.”

And although it can be frustrating to be unable to meet 100 percent of the need, Mitchell said he does cherish the chance to see lives changed for the long term.

“I've actually had that wonderful experience where a person will come back and ask me to help them with something, and they're way over the income guidelines,” Mitchell said. “They used to be low-income when they first came to us, but in part because of whatever assistance we were able to provide when they were at that down moment, they were able to become tax-paying, hard-working citizens just like everyone else, where, ironically, we have to say no.”

Mitchell said that's a result that the whole community can appreciate.

“That's the best feeling of all, because not only have we helped that person, we're providing a service to Greenville and kind of the whole community that I think everyone can feel good about,” Mitchell said.
