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Law group reaches milestone

EAST P.A. NON-PROFIT GROUP FORMED LAST YEAR TO GIVE LEGAL HELP TO POOR

By **Thaai Walker**
Mercury News

Community Legal Services of East Palo Alto opened inside two cramped rooms and with a tiny budget and the modest hope to simply survive.

This week, the non-profit organization — launched by residents who wanted to ensure that low-income people would have a place to turn for help with legal troubles — is celebrating its one-year anniversary.

The organization, which started with no corporate structure, no lease and no board of directors, has a \$220,000 budget and recently got a boost from a \$150,000 anonymous donation. Its board of directors includes community leaders, and it en-

joys the support of attorneys from some of the area's top law firms, who provide their services pro bono.

"It's one of the miracles in the world that we were able to sustain ourselves this whole last year," said Gerry Steinberg, the clinic's executive director. "Our challenge was to show that there was a real need for this service."

Steinberg said the grassroots clinic has provided advice and legal assistance to more than 1,000 people, mostly in the areas of immigration, housing and civil rights.

Some of those clients include an abused wife who turned to the clinic for help in securing legal residency after escaping from her husband; a disabled Menlo Park veteran who was locked in a battle

with the IRS over a technical error; and a Redwood City mother who had to battle a life-insurance company after losing the father of her children in a car accident.

But convincing potential funders that the clinic was worthy of donations was difficult when the organization was being spearheaded by people who, for the most part, had no background in law.

Residents and community leaders came together to open the clinic after the East Palo Alto Law Project, a community cornerstone that had provided free legal service to residents for 20 years, announced in May 2002 that it would close because of money troubles.

Stanford University's law school opened another law

clinic but made it clear that training law students would be its primary focus. Community members wanted a clinic that considered serving clients a top priority.

Community Legal Services of East Palo Alto now operates out of more spacious offices at 2117 University Ave. Stanford's clinic shares the space and Steinberg said the two clinics complement each other.

A public celebration is planned for next month.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information about Community Legal Services of East Palo Alto, call (650) 326-6440.

Contact **Thaai Walker** at twalker@mercurynews.com or (650) 688-7581.



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