

# Low-cost legal clinics have the lawyers talking

By MIKE SCANLON

Using saturation advertising and a mass market approach, a new wave of profit-making legal clinics is offering cut-rate prices for a few, relatively routine law services.

Whether the services are as cut-rate as the prices depends on whom you ask.

"In a clinic you have attorneys who are right out of school and have just passed their bar and have little or no experience," said Roger Len-

ner, executive director of the 4,000-member Detroit Bar Association.

It's on advertising that clinics live or die. And Lennert said, "You would find a great number of attorneys feeling that the advent of clinics and advertising can downgrade the profession."

Lennert probably could be expected to think that. Until the U.S. Supreme Court struck down such bans in 1977, the second item in the state bar rule book prohibited lawyers from paying to get their name known.

"WE WERE THE FIRST clinic in Michigan to advertise, and response was overwhelming," said Edward Cherniak.

Cherniak, Norman Greenfield and Mark Koppelman are partners in the Southfield-based American Legal Clinics, which has four offices in the Detroit area. The trio are experienced lawyers, but Cherniak says they serve only as consultants to

four staff attorneys, who perform most clinic work.

Cherniak refused to say how much he spends on advertising.

It's a kind of financial question that I'd prefer not to answer," he said.

He was interested enough in the topic, however, to wonder what radio station a caller had heard his ad on.

One way or another, somebody out there is hearing a lot about American Legal Clinics. Cherniak estimated 3,000 people have stopped at one of the offices for a free 30-minute consultation since the first clinic opened last year.

He says about that half that number—or about 1,500 people in little more than six months—have hired the clinics' legal services.

Cherniak says divorce is the "staple item" in the clinics' business. About one case in three involves either divorce, child custody or child support matters.

"I think that we are offering service to people who thought that they could never afford lawyers," said Mitzi Weitzman, attorney at the Garden City office.

Mrs. Weitzman, 36, passed her bar exam last November, but she believes work she did as a student in the non-profit University of Detroit Urban Law Clinic gives her more experience than the numbers tend to indicate.

JOHN REARDON runs the U of D clinic.

"I think (profit-making clinics) certainly provide a needed service for members of the public who are employed and therefore don't qualify for county-sponsored clinics, yet don't have the income to afford their own attorney," said Reardon. Reardon also praised clinics in general for providing experience to young lawyers "very quickly," and for their potential spur to competition among all lawyers.

He offered a note of caution, however, on the typical clinic practice of posting a fee schedule. Cherniak, whose company charges \$250 for an uncontested divorce, calls the schedule "the menu."

"It doesn't take much to make a simple case complicated," said Reardon. "They (clients) may find themselves paying significantly more, not because the lawyer is trying to gouge them, but just because the case got complicated."

Cherniak and Mrs. Weitzman disagree.

Cherniak says the key to the clinic operation is a system of legal forms and manuals he devised before opening the first office.

"Upwards of 90 per cent of the cases fit into the forms," said Cherniak. "We are not really looking for the things that don't."

Clients "very seldom" pay more than the listed fee, said Cherniak, but if too much time is required for

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— Mitzi Weitzman  
clinic attorney

the case, the additional fees are billed at an hourly rate of \$35.

"I think that we find that we individualize each kind of complaint, and the work we do is made to fit the needs of the client," said Mrs. Weitzman.

Divorces, the company's most common kind of case, vary in cost "depending on how well they (the marriage partners) get along," said Mrs. Weitzman.

"Sometimes you have to go to court over and over because they can't agree," she said.

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