

# SUBURBAN LIFE

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## FLAP takes on scales of justice

■ The legal system can be a scary proposition, if you've never had contact with it. But attorneys from throughout the metropolitan area are making it user friendly for the victims of domestic violence through a new program offered by First Step, western Wayne's domestic violence program.

BY SUE MASON  
STAFF WRITER



Judy Ellis doesn't mind creating a FLAP. Neither does Gerard Mantese. In fact, they've found a number of attorneys in the metropolitan area that are of the same opinion.

FLAP, according to Noah Webster, is to become excited or confused. Ellis, Mantese and company are excited, but forget the confusion. There's none of that when it comes to the First Step Legal Advocacy Program, better known as FLAP.

Ellis is executive director of First Step, First Step, western Wayne County's project on domestic violence; Mantese is an attorney with the firm of Honigman, Miller, Schwarz and Cohn. Together with Kelly Machado, an attorney and president of First Step's board of directors, and advocate Kisa Kunitz, they came up with a three-phase program to provide legal assistance for battered women.

The program addresses an issue that surfaced in study by the Michigan Supreme Court two years ago. Women don't have equal representation in the courtroom.

"We've known for years that the victims coming to us need care and support in the legal system," Ellis said. "A lot of women don't know their rights; a



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**Planning Session:** Attorneys Rosanne Less (from left) and Gerard Mantese, First Step executive director Judy Ellis and attorney David C. Brown prepare for Saturday's training session for volunteers attorneys involved in the First Step Legal Advocacy Program.

lot only know what they hear from others.

"And let's face it, the criminal justice system is frightening in and of itself."

By placing ads in several legal journals, including the Michigan Bar Journal, Mantese, as the FLAP coordinator, lined up 53 attorneys from 33 law firms throughout Wayne and Oakland counties to provide pro bono (free) services to clients of First Step.

### Overwhelming response

"The response was overwhelming," Mantese said. "Attorneys from small and large firms signed up. Most don't practice in the area, but wanted to help."

An expertise in family law wasn't a requirement to join the program; in fact, the attorneys' backgrounds are as varied as the areas they come from. Mantese, for example, specializes on commercial litigation, Machado in immigration and labor law.

Working with attorneys Rosanne Less and David Brown who are experts in family law, Mantese developed a training seminar for the volunteer attorneys to prepare them for the work. There also are 3-4 family law practitioners available to serve as mentors for the volunteer.

"The attorneys are sensitive to issue of domestic violence and their training is to help them understand what survivors have been through and what they face," Mantese said.

"We want the attorneys to identify with First Step; we want them to know our goals and believe what we doing and what the staff is doing," Ellis added.

Volunteers are asked to work a minimum of 10 hours a year. Cases are assigned on a rotating basis and volunteers work one case at a time.

### In phases

In anticipation of a flood of requests from First Step clients for legal assistance, FLAP is being phased in. The first phase involved the set-up of walk-in clinics the first and third Thursdays of the month at the Church of the Holy Spirit in Livonia and First Step's office in Southgate.

Currently, the attorney provide legal counseling and help clients obtain restraining orders, injunctions and simple divorces — no children. Saturday they will be meet to discuss the start of the second phase — handling more complicated divorces, custody cases and related matters. Mantese would like to be in the position to assign more complex cases beginning in July.

The third phase is to work on changing the institutions and systems which deal with batterings and rape to increase the effectiveness of the criminal justice system's response to those crimes.

Anywhere from 5-10 women show up at the clinics on a given evening and the questions they field are "extremely varied," Mantese said.

"They point out the basic lack of information women have about their rights," he said. "They come in feeling powerless, but with the clinics they can ask questions without fear. They get solid information, feel they've been heard and empowered."

"And the legal knowledge they get from the clinic carries over into their lives. They feel more in control of their

destiny."

Ellis and Mantese agree that business will boom with the start of the second phase and are hoping to attract more attorneys and financial support for FLAP. Currently, the program is absorbing the costs of such things and court filings and depositions.

### Support needed

First Step has written some grant requests and the amount of money FLAP attracts will "determine how quickly and heavily we jump into the more complex cases," Ellis said. Ideally, she would like to have enough money to hire a staffer to schedule the clinics, track cases and recruit even more attorneys.

A step in that direction is coming from the State Bar, which has provided plenty of advice and guidance. The Bar is looking at FLAP as a model for similar programs in the state and is about to certify it as a pro bono association, Ellis said.

"This can be exciting for an attorney because you can help change a person's life and broaden your knowledge," Mantese said. "It's a way of having an impact, especially if you're looking for important litigation where you can get involved."

"I handle my first restraining order for the program and for me, it was very rewarding."

Attorneys interested in helping the First Step Legal Advocacy Program can call Ellis at 525-2230 or Mantese at 256-7705. And they'll get something in return.

"We can promise them a rewarding experience," Ellis said.