

MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Legal Aid Announces 2026 Barnes Award Winner

Grand Rapids, Michigan, September x, 2026 -- Legal Aid of Western Michigan is proud to announce that Varnum LLP has been selected to receive the 2026 Michael S. Barnes Award, for the firm's extraordinary leadership in providing volunteer legal services to community members who would otherwise face significant barriers to legal representation.

The **Michael S. Barnes Award** recognizes a law firm or attorney who has made significant pro bono contributions benefiting legal aid clients. Michael S. Barnes, a partner with the law firm Smith Haughey Rice & Roegge, was an outstanding leader in providing legal aid and pro bono service to Legal Aid's client communities.

LAWM Executive Director, Pamela Hoekwater, says, "Varnum has been a consistent supporter of our Pro Bono Program since its inception in the 1980s. Attorneys with Varnum have handled hundreds of cases for Legal Aid clients unable to afford an attorney. They have taken on the difficult cases where Legal Aid has the greatest need, in areas such as family law, housing, probate, tax, consumer, and expungement. What is most impressive about Varnum is their firm-wide commitment – at least sixty of their attorneys have donated over 100 hours of their time to legal aid clients."

"Legal Aid of Western Michigan provides an important service to people who would not otherwise have access to legal help," said Gary Mouw, Varnum partner who is active in the firm's work with Legal Aid and chairs the firm's Pro Bono program. "It has been rewarding to work alongside Legal Aid and see so many of our attorneys step forward to support its clients."

"We are honored to receive this award and grateful for our longstanding partnership with Legal Aid of Western Michigan," said Jon Bylsma, firm chair at Varnum. "Speaking from personal experience, it is incredibly rewarding to vigorously represent people who need legal services to protect themselves, their families, or their rights, but may not otherwise be able to afford them. We are proud of the many Varnum attorneys who have given their time to support Legal Aid clients."

Legal Aid will honor the attorneys of the Varnum law firm at our Barnes Award Ceremony & Pro Bono Reception, taking place in Grand Rapids on October 29th. For more information contact Noah Joseph at njoseph@lawestmi.org.

Legal Aid of Western Michigan is a nonprofit law firm serving 17 counties from five regional offices. We deliver free legal help to people who live in or near poverty, and to seniors. We represent clients who face civil (non-criminal) legal problems threatening their basic living needs, like housing, family stability, food- and income-security, healthcare access, and safety from domestic abuse. We are headquartered in Grand Rapids, with offices in Holland, Kalamazoo, Muskegon, and St. Joseph. www.lawestmi.org