

LAW WEEK

COLORADO

Former Judge Looks To Continue Community Service

Angela Arkin will offer pro se support through the Harris Law Firm



FORMER JUDGE ANGELA ARKIN JOINED THE HARRIS LAW FIRM TO LAUNCH A NEW SELF-REPRESENTED RESOURCE CENTER.

PHOTO: LAW WEEK, TONY FLESOR

BY TONY FLESOR
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Former 18th District Judge Angela Arkin returned to the other side of the bench this month when she joined The Harris Law Firm.

The retired judge made an unusual move in her transition back to private practice, however, with the creation of an experimental program designed to provide modest means services for people seeking help in family court. Arkin fulfilled a long-time goal of adding more available legal services to the community through The Harris Law Firm Self-Represented Resource Center.

Arkin quoted her husband in the description of the new program: A “doc in the box” for family legal services. The idea is to have legal professionals — herself, a new lawyer and a senior paralegal for the time being — available to offer out-of-court legal help similar to the way urgent care centers provide medical services without requiring a full medical history or an ongoing client-provider relationship. The goal is to offer unbundled services in a novel way — not as a feeder to other legal services but as a separate and distinct option, Arkin said.

The resource center will offer consultation and advice, assistance with document preparation, assistance with child support and maintenance calculation, process preparation and

coaching, and suggestions for other experts and professionals.

The idea of offering modest means services to family court litigants is not a new idea, though. The Colorado judicial branch offers family court documents online and self-represented litigant coordinators and nonprofit organizations offer options to people going through domestic matters. Arkin emphasized the need for more even more services though.

Across the country, it’s accepted that about 70 percent of domestic cases have at least one party that is unrepresented. Arkin said it’s unclear how many of the remaining cases have two parties unrepresented though.

The idea for the resource center is to fill the space where attorney services meets unbundled legal services. Other options that provide help in filling out documents pro se often stop short of offering legal advice, and online tools that connect people with lawyers or legal professionals via phone, Skype or email lack the detailed attorney-client relationship that comes in face-to-face contact, Arkin said. She said simply hearing someone’s story and going through the details of their situation to determine what’s relevant can be an in-depth process that requires a more direct form of communication.

Arkin has experience providing similar services as well. In addition to serving as a judge in domestic court from 2002 until her departure

from the bench in December, she served two terms on the Colorado Bar Association’s Access to Justice Commission. She said the focus of the commission during her time on it was helping pro se litigants understand the courts and the processes involved in them.

Beyond her time on the bench and her time on the commission, she knew she wanted to continue helping that section of the community.

“In terms of figuring out what I wanted to be after the word ‘judge’ was no longer at the front of my first name ... I wanted to do something that was more related to all these folks who didn’t have the resources.” She said the commission and other groups devoted to helping pro se litigants have come a long way in the services they provide, but there are still limitations on the help they can give, and the need for services is still greater than what court volunteers can fill. “Thinking of all of that made me want to do something different than just going out and putting up my shingle and starting to mediate.”

For Arkin, the idea to offer a program like this grew out of her personal interest to continue serving the community but also from observing the success of Jay Kamlet’s Lawbank. She reached out to The Harris Law Firm’s Rich Harris because of his reputation as a business innovator and as a philanthropist. She said Harris agreed with the cause of providing services

to a segment of the community that typically slips through the gap of qualifying for legal aid and affording an attorney.

Harris also presented Arkin with the law schools’ perspective as well, she said. Although she felt pursuing her pro se resource center as a law school clinic wasn’t feasible, they did succeed in working with the law schools’ legal residency program to host a resident.

As for long-term plans, Arkin said she also has a goal of having a resource center at each of Harris’ offices in Denver, Fort Collins, Englewood and Evergreen.

Although the resource center is connected to the Harris Law Firm, Arkin said one of the goals is simply to get more people offering similar services.

“Rich really wants to invite people to join us to do this in the market. We both think there’s lots of work out there like this,” Arkin said. “What we really want to do more than anything else other than providing these services, what we want to do is encourage other people to jump in and provide these services because we see a huge community of individuals who could really be helped by getting these services, and a dearth of these services.”

The resource center is open and taking clients already, though Arkin said she expects it to become fully operational in February. •

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