

What's in a name change?

Milwaukee LGBT center helps trans people navigate name-change process pro se



Alex Corona, transgender program coordinator at the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center, stands outside the Milwaukee County Courthouse. Corona's clinic at the center helps transgender people navigate the legal process to change their names in the state of Wisconsin. (Photo by Kevin Harnack)

By Michaela Paukner

mpaukner@wislawjournal.com

The Milwaukee County courthouse can be a daunting place for pro se petitioners. And for transgender people who are trying to change their names, the entire legal process can appear just as intimidating.

Alex Corona, transgender program coordinator at the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center, set up the Name Change Clinic to guide transpeople through the name-change process in Milwaukee, Ozaukee and Racine counties. The clinic helps with paperwork, covers fees through grant funding and answers petitioners' questions about what to expect when working with the courts.

"The legal process itself is meant to be done by lawyers or legal-minded people," Corona said. "It's not meant to be done pro se."

Corona had an idea to counter procedures that can be confusing to non-lawyers. She asked Milwaukee County Judge William Pocan and former Chief Judge Maxine White if they'd participate in a program that literally walked people through the courthouse and the steps to change their names.

During the one-day program, Pocan and White talked with a group of people from the LGBT center planning to change their names and showed them the courtroom where they'd appear. The group also met with volunteer lawyers from Foley & Lardner and staff from the Milwaukee Justice Center to learn more about the legal process they were about to start.

Since that day more than a year ago, Pocan said Corona has taken the reins on guiding her clients through name changes.

"Our little investment of time with Alex has saved us a lot of time in the court system," Pocan said. "She's been doing everything. She's incredible."

Pocan said he can always tell when it's one of Corona's clients who is appearing before him because they know what they need to do and the paperwork is always in order.

"The program makes it so they're the easiest name changes to grant," Pocan said.

Corona is thankful for the support she has received from the Milwaukee County courts and the judges' willingness to get involved with the clinic. She said she has encountered some judges in other places who seem hesitant to grant name changes to trans people.

That's one of a number of barriers in the name-change process for trans people. Many also can't afford the fees associated with filing a name-change petition and publishing a public notice in the county's newspaper of record, and others are excluded from changing their names because of criminal records or having sex-offender status.

"Oftentimes, trans people, people of color, marginalized people carry the label of sex offender for being involved with something as innocuous as sex work — something that shouldn't bar you from changing your name," Corona said.

Corona believes Wisconsin should revise

its rules governing name changes, as other states around the country have done. Some have eliminated the public-notice component of name changes, and others have removed courts from name-change procedures entirely.

"There are judgments being made in various courts to limit these barriers and break down these old ways of thinking," Corona said. "Wisconsin is still a little clunky and definitely has outdated verbiage and some traditional, harmful ways of thinking when it comes to this process for trans people."

Change is happening, albeit slowly. Corona said in the two years since she's been the coordinator of the center's transgender program, Wisconsin has removed the requirement that the name-change petitions be notarized and Milwaukee County's newspaper of record has lowered its fees for public notices filed by the LGBT center.

Within the courts, Pocan enacted a small but significant change to make the procedure less intimidating for the people appearing before him for name changes. Corona told him it can be uncomfortable for trans people to say and be called by their legal name, so Pocan will read the person's legal name once for the record and then reference them as "petitioner" throughout the rest of the proceeding.

"At the end, I say it's an honor to be the first person to call them by their official new name," Pocan said. "You just see them smile. There's little things we all could do to make human beings feel more comfortable."