

Local spotlight

# Firm aids staff in crisis

■ JustUs call center offers alternative for employee disputes, whistleblowing.

By MAUREEN McDONALD  
Special to *The Detroit News*

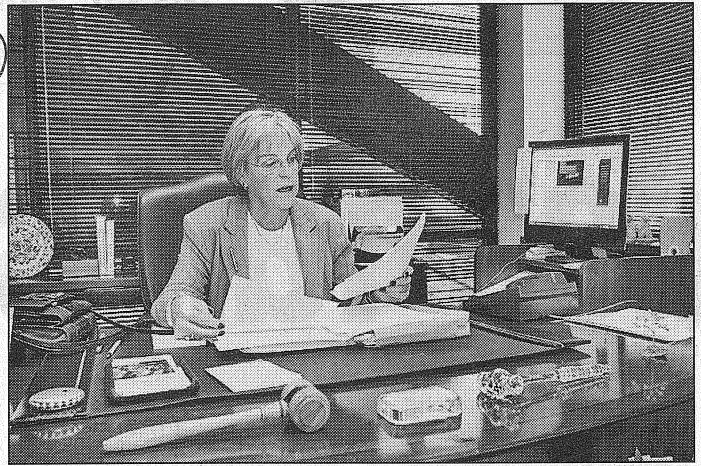
**DETROIT** — Although Karen S. Kienbaum, owner of a law firm bearing her name, makes the majority of income on litigating employment and labor law, her aim is to grow JustUs, a separate division that specializes in alternative dispute resolution.

“JustUs provides fair, expeditious and cost effective resolutions for employee disputes, including whistleblowing and fraud concerns,” said Kienbaum, a former labor attorney for Blue Cross/Blue Shield and Ford Motor Co. Response to one lawsuit could involve \$50,000 to \$60,000 in preparatory legal fees while the JustUs call center is a fraction of that cost.

Five professional lawyers supervise six law students who work in a call center that responds to employee questions from 14 participating companies. The team has scripts to elicit information and they have access to extensive research on the company data base and mediation journals to help formulate unbiased opinions.

Callers report problems with accounting, attendance, conflict of interest, discrimination, discipline, expense report fraud, mandatory overtime, personality conflicts, safety and health concerns, unfair treatment and work rules, among other concerns. The firm doesn't offer legal advice, rather problem assessment and suggestions for resolutions.

“Employees are as nervous to-



Wayne E. Smith / The Detroit News

Karen Smith Kienbaum wants to grow JustUs, a call center which focuses on resolving disputes in the workplace.

## Karen Smith Kienbaum & Associates

■ **Specialty:** The Detroit-based employment and labor law firm also operates a call center for legal and ethical concerns called JustUs.

■ **Cost:** JustUs runs about \$30,000 a year for a company with 1,500 employees.

■ **Contact:** (313) 967-0700 or visit [www.ksklaw.com](http://www.ksklaw.com)

day as they have ever been. They are more inclined to be tenacious about fighting for a job,” said Kienbaum, noting concerns about discrimination for age or race are the top concerns from callers. Companies authorize a neutral third party facilitator, much as they would extend an employee assistance program so people have recourse outside of immediate supervisors.

“Complaints about the workplace never go away. Ironically, since the Civil Rights Act of 1964,

the government logs 75,000 civil rights violations a year in the U.S.A. These complaints involve age, race, sex, religion, national origin and disabilities,” she notes.

John Reis, vice president of human resources for Webasto Roof Systems Inc., in Rochester Hills said its 1,400 nonunion employees in Michigan and Kentucky have access to JustUs as needed.

“This system helps eliminate favoritism in a work site. People feel listened to because they can go to human resources or a designated third party to resolve questions of discipline.”

Over the five years since JustUs was introduced the smart call service has communicated workplace fraud, helped employees regain jobs when accurate evidence was produced to vindicate someone and helped others understand the disciplinary process.

*Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.*

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