LEGAL SERVICES SOCIETY: 2012 NEW ORLEANS OUTREACH PROGRAM SUMMARY

During the week of May 12, 2012 to May 19, 2012, fifteen law students from The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law travelled to New Orleans, Louisiana to participate in the Legal Services Society (LSS) New Orleans Outreach Program through volunteering at the Orleans Public Defenders Office. Throughout our time in New Orleans, we had the privilege of assisting the talented and dedicated public defenders in meeting some of the legal needs of their most impoverished clients. We saw first-hand how much of a difference a week of our work can make in the legal cases and lives of some of New Orleans’ most disadvantaged citizens.

During the 2012 trip, each student dedicated over forty hours to assisting the Orleans Public Defenders staff in a variety of ways. The responsibilities of the law student volunteers included: conducting client intake interviews and jail visits, providing clients and their families with information about the status of their cases, researching legal issues, writing motions and memorandums of law, reviewing and summarizing discovery evidence, and assisting with court appearances. Some of the law student volunteers even had the unique opportunity to speak personally with the presiding judge of a felony trial that they had observed.

The Orleans Public Defenders office is one of the most struggling public defender offices in the United States; in fact the office suffered several setbacks in the recent months, including attorney layoffs and the discovery that the New Orleans Traffic Court withheld a significant portion of public defender funding. Having the opportunity to volunteer at the Orleans Public Defenders office and witnessing first-hand the problems facing the criminal justice system while being able to provide personal attention to the indigent defendants was an inspiring, and truly invaluable, experience for all who participated.

The New Orleans Outreach Program is coordinated and conducted by LSS, a student organization at The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law. LSS works to provide the law school community with hands-on experience in the field of public interest law and to provide relief to underserved and disadvantaged communities in Washington, D.C. and the nation at large. This year, first, second and third-year law students participated in the New Orleans Outreach Program. All participants applied for a position in the program, and were chosen by the LSS executive board based on their application and expressed and demonstrated interest in public interest work. The participants and LSS executive board provided a majority of the funding for the Program. In addition, the Columbus School of Law and members of the Catholic University of America’s Board of Visitors also made generous donations to help finance the work. We are particularly grateful to Veryl V. Miles, Dean of the Columbus School of Law, for her generous contributions to our trip over the past few years.

Overall, the 2012 New Orleans Outreach Program was a resounding success. We received positive feedback from the Orleans Public Defenders’ staff, and have been invited to return in the Spring 2013. Moreover, each of the participants said they found the work eye-opening and immensely rewarding. The work in New Orleans impressed upon us the value of doing pro bono work, regardless of the type of law we plan to practice in the future.
Several participants from the 2012 New Orleans Outreach Program provided testimonials regarding their impressions of the experience.

LSS group after dinner in the Garden District of New Orleans

**Brian Farnkoff (1L)**

For someone like me, who is choosing to focus on securities law and regulatory affairs in law school, this Legal Services Society trip presented an invaluable opportunity for me to understand the complexities of an under-resourced criminal justice system and the gravity of the impact that selfless attorneys can have on the lives of the indigent in society. It was an experience that was far removed from detached academic debates in the classroom, while simultaneously serving as an acute reminder of the practical significance that abstract legal principles have on people’s every-day lives. We were at the center of the world’s prison capital (Louisiana incarcerates more of its people, per capita, than any of its U.S. counterparts, awarding it the highest incarceration rate in the world), and our trip occurred only months after the Orleans Parish Public Defender’s office was rocked by a budget crisis forcing the Chief Public Defender Derwyn Bunton to lay off a third of his staff attorneys. Exacerbating these problems, we arrived amidst public revelations from an audit disclosing that the New Orleans Traffic Court had been improperly withholding hundreds of thousands of dollars per year from the Orleans Public Defenders.

Before I enrolled in law school I worked in electoral politics, so observing first-hand how devastating these adverse political and budgetary dynamics can be on an already-strained system was enlightening and something I will always remember. This contextualized the importance of the work I was doing, which entailed listening to and transcribing legally pertinent sections of prison phone calls of the accused. One defendant was a murder suspect and the other was

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1. [http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/05/louisiana_is_the_worlds_prison.html](http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/05/louisiana_is_the_worlds_prison.html)
alleged to have invaded his girlfriend’s home. This was heart-wrenching work, which only increased my level of respect for the accomplished staff attorneys who honorably bear the emotional and psychological weight of these cases with professionalism every day. I was also able to observe the high caliber of talent in the public defender’s office by sitting in on a raucous attempted murder trial from beginning to jury deliberation. I got to see the victim, who survived, and the defendant himself take the stand. This experience—the politics, the work, and observing a full trial—will forever serve as a potent reminder of the impact that an attorney can have on a client’s life and of the sanctity of the attorney-client relationship in our criminal justice system. I have since shared my experience with many other former colleagues in politics and government, as it has certainly shaped my outlook and perspective on the Constitutional rights of the accused and the problems of potential excesses in minimum sentencing guidelines, among other things.

LSS 1Ls delving into their work at the Orleans Public Defenders Office

Tommy D’Antonio (1L)

Being a part of the LSS trip to New Orleans this past spring really changed the way that I look at what attorneys can do for those in need. For a week, I was placed with an attorney in the Orleans Public Defender’s office, helping her work on discovery for an upcoming murder trial. I was asked to go through dozens of hours of recorded prison conversations to help our client develop the factual predicate for a favorable disposition. Our work helped the client put together that case, and it was an exhilarating experience for a law student like me. I also observed proceedings in criminal court, and concluded that the public defenders serve a vital role in the city of New Orleans. Frankly, it seemed to me that accused criminals commonly suffer from “overcharging” of cases, and regular manipulation of case filings to avoid speedy trial obligations. The lawyers at the Public Defender’s office, though underappreciated, help ensure that there is some “balance” between the powers of the state, in the form of the prosecutors, and the accused. Being in the OPD office, I saw firsthand that lawyers can give a real voice to those who cannot speak effectively for themselves, and guide those who must navigate their way through the maze of complex laws, regulations, and procedures that stand between these individuals and the justice they seek.
Laura Suelau (2L)

I first participated in the LSS trip the summer after my 1L year. Working with the Public Defender sparked my interest in criminal law and public interest work after a year of not being sure what direction I wanted to take in my legal career. This summer I was able to further delve into substantive and interesting criminal issues. I believe the experience helped me build some concrete career skills from writing habeas corpus writs to meetings with clients. The camaraderie with other students and amazing city is an added bonus!

Brittni Downs (1L)

The experience I had during the LSS Pro Bono trip to New Orleans went above and beyond my expectations. I always knew I had an interest in criminal law and could see myself being a criminal defense attorney, but, after the New Orleans trip, my vision has never been so clear. While working at The Orleans Public Defenders’ Office I was assigned tasks such as listening to and transcribing 911 and jail calls, going to court for first appearances, going to visit clients at the jail, researching case law, and drafting court documents. I got the chance to work with two extremely intelligent attorneys who gave me great insight into the criminal defense field and helped me realize that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. The most influential part of my trip was attending an Attempted Second Degree Murder case where it was made clear to me by the returned verdict that there are still social and institutionalized injustices present in Louisiana, and that the Orleans Public Defenders’ Office needs all the help they can get to combat them. I was honored to have been able to give the attorneys some of that much-needed assistance, and I cannot wait to go back next summer!

Aaron Glaser (3L)

I had always wanted to go on the LSS trip. From the people who know me that probably sounds odd - I aspire to become a Prosecutor one day, so I know how unusual it seems for me to
have always wanted to go and help staff the New Orleans Public Defender's Office. But the fact of the matter is I do believe that our legal system only works if both the prosecution and defense zealously do their jobs - justice can only be achieved with diligent counsel on both sides of the courtroom.

So, if anything, my trip to New Orleans confirmed my belief in our legal system - but also showed me how far the criminal justice system still has to advance in some parts of the country. The lawyers we aided diligently represented their clients to the best of their abilities; however, they did so in a system that seems to short-change them in every conceivable resource - funds, office supplies, support staff, and even an appropriate number of public defenders. In fact, the Sunday we arrived in the Crescent City the New Orleans Times-Picayune began running a weeklong series on how Louisiana is the prison capital of the world.

So, while I can't say the LSS trip taught me that everything in the legal system is how it should be - I can say it showed me that there are diligent persons on both sides of the legal courtroom working to achieve justice even where it is delivered incomplete to those who need it the most. While I still strive to become a Prosecutor, I will always also work to ensure the lawyers on the other side of the aisle have the resources they need to protect their clients - justice is served not when I get a guilty conviction, but when I do knowing the accused had a public defender who had the resources necessary to zealously defend one's rights.

LSS members working diligently at the Orleans Public Defenders Office

Siobhan Donahue (2L)

The New Orleans trip was an awesome experience. It was interesting to see first-hand the good work that the Legal Services Society can do with communities that are in dire need of legal resources. The attorney I worked with was great, and even though I was only there for one week I gained valuable experience working with her. Everyone in the Public Defender’s office was grateful for the pro bono work we were able to provide, and students were able to put their legal skills to work while also enjoying a fantastic city like New Orleans.