A Year in Review 04.2014 to 03.2015

Pro Bono at CUA Law

2015 Alternative Spring Break

Instead of taking a break, six CUA Law students decided to give one to area social causes in need of volunteer service. The students signed up to donate their time and talent via the DC Alternative Spring Break Program, sponsored during the week of March 9-13 by the Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law, Georgetown University Law Center, and American University Washington College of Law.

Nearly forty volunteers spread out to help with such causes and organizations as Capital Area Immigrants’ Rights (CAIR) (for which training began in February), Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Mothers’ Outreach Network, the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia, and So Others Might Eat, to name a few.

Third-year CUA Law student Rebecca Neville (below, left) staffed a legal hotline at CAIR.

“What I really liked about CAIR was that the people who work there are supportive and friendly,” said Neville. “And you really are helping people the whole time! Putting people in contact with their lawyers or giving them status messages. It was a truly rewarding way to spend part of my spring break.”

Working with her peers across town, CUA Law’s Pro Bono Coordinator Jen Tschirch began planning last fall – attempting to match students’ interests with available opportunities.

“Nine organizations hosted projects, and 39 students responded to the call to volunteer,” said Tschirch. “We didn’t have space for quite all of them, which tells us that this is a worthwhile endeavor to give students an opportunity to engage in meaningful work locally over break."

Fourth Annual Pro Bono Reception

The fourth annual Pro Bono Reception celebrating program participants was held on April 3, 2014, in the Louise H. and James Keelty Jr. Atrium. We were honored to have Jim Sandman, President of the Legal Services Corporation, serve as guest speaker. About 100 attendees, including students, faculty, staff, alumni and community organization partners, were recognized for their efforts.

Brookland Community Resources Nonprofit Incorporation

The story begins in 1994, when CUA Law alumnus Steve Riley (1979) co-founded Potomac Community Resources (PCR) in northeast Washington, D.C. as an anchor, a lifeline, and a source of encouragement and support in a world that doesn’t always offer it up on its own. BCR is a grass-roots organization that works to promote the full inclusion of people with intellectual and physical disabilities into all aspects of community life. It offers social and recreational programs for members at sites throughout the Brookland neighborhood.

For dozens of teens and adults with developmental differences, Brookland Community Resources (BCR) in northeast Washington, D.C. is an anchor, a lifeline, and a source of encouragement and support in a world that doesn’t always offer it up on its own. BCR is a grass-roots organization that works to promote the full inclusion of people with intellectual and physical disabilities into all aspects of community life. It offers social and recreational programs for members at sites throughout the Brookland neighborhood.

Students have engaged in pro bono work with many other organizations and agencies over the past year, including CAIR Coalition, CASA de Maryland, DC Employment Justice Center, Hogan Immigrant Services, Legal Counsel for the Elderly, Office of Administrative Hearings Resource Center and Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. Below are a selection of several pro bono projects in which CUA Law’s students have been involved.

The Pro Bono Program at the Columbus School of Law (CUA Law) is on the spectrum of experiential learning opportunities available to students throughout their tenure here. Pro bono project enable students to apply lessons learned in the classroom out in the community, advancing their professional development while benefiting those in need of services. Participation is voluntary, and the range of options available to CUA Law students being cited in nation’s capital is extensive.

The Pro Bono Program began in 1997. Since then, the program has provided law students with opportunities to engage in hands-on, law-related volunteer work in the DC area during their spring break. Their work serves the community, provides exposure to lawyering opportunities, build connections in the community, and accumulates student pro bono hours.

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Brookland Community Resources nonprofit incorporation (continued from page 1)

“A project like this is a great way for students to apply some corporate legal skills, learn a bit about tax law and nonprofits, gain some experience dealing with government forms and rules, and most importantly, help worthy organizations complete an essential task,” says Colinaus (top left). “It is great that CUA was able to participate in this type of project, both for the student doing the work and for the client.”

Belford (bottom left), who will graduate in May, 2015, knew his time would be well spent in part because he took Colinaus’s federal income taxation class and was eager to apply what he’d learned.

“When Professor Colinaus filled me in on the client’s work, I knew that I wanted to help out,” said Belford. “BCR is a fantastic group that does very important work in the local community. I really enjoyed working with the client and collaborating with Professor Colinaus. I definitely learned a lot about the regulatory and practical considerations involved in tax matters.”

CAIR Coalition

The Capital Area Immigrants’ Rights (CAIR) Coalition provided a training at CUA Law in January for law students interested in engaging in any of these pro bono endeavors: staffing CAIR’s detention hotline; accompanying staff attorneys on visits to federal immigration detention centers in Virginia to provide “Know Your Rights” presentations and conduct individual orientations with detainees in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody; and conducting credible fear interviews.

The CUA Innocence Project Clinic & Clemency Project

The CUA Innocence Project Clinic & Clemency Project represents persons convicted in federal court who are seeking executive clemency from the President of the United States and conducts investigations of claims of actual innocence on behalf of individuals referred to the Clinic by the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project (MAIP). In the spring-2014 semester the Clinic signed retainers with six federal prisoners to assist them in preparing and filing applications for commutation of sentence. Students in the Clinic also are representing four cases in which the individual is claiming actual innocence of the crime for which he was convicted. Recently a fifth case was referred back to MAIP and a private law firm to litigate a claim of actual innocence after the Clinic completed reinvestigation of the case. A team of volunteers also have been collecting information from every state on executive clemency applications and grants over the past five years. Information from this survey will help the Clinic in its mission to expand clemency services to persons convicted in state courts.

The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless

Over the winter, CUA Law students have assisted the Homeless Family Outreach Project of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (WLCH) in reaching out to families who have no safe place to sleep at night who are seeking emergency shelter. By circulating flyers and speaking one-on-one with families at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center on Rhode Island Avenue in Northeast DC, volunteers advise families of the right to shelter and other important rights during hypothermic or severe weather conditions and connect to the Legal Clinic families who believe they have been unlawfully denied shelter or who have suffered from other legal violations so that an attorney can try to assist them.

DC Consortium of Legal Services Providers

The Community Engagement Project (“Project”) is an important initiative undertaken to better understand the legal needs of low-income DC residents in order to inform the way providers deliver those services. The Project is sponsored by the DC Consortium of Legal Services Providers, whose mission is to coordinate the delivery, expand the availability, and improve the quality of legal services in the District of Columbia. Faith Mullen, who teaches in the Civil Practice Clinic at the Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law, has volunteered as project manager over the past year, collaborating with other legal services providers, community based organizations, and law students, among others, to lead this unprecedented effort.

The Project has been implemented in carefully designed phases. Facilitators, including CUA Law students, conducted focus groups with over 100 community members last fall to gauge their legal service needs. The next step in the process, using a survey developed in collaboration with Dr. Enrique Pamatmat, Chair of the CUA Sociology Department, entailed volunteers (again, including CUA Law students) asking community members who earn less than 200% of the federal poverty level about challenges and concerns beyond traditional “legal” categories they have.

The next phase of the Project will be to use the data collected to determine how to improve the delivery of legal service in DC. This will have far-reaching positive implications for the over 180,000 people living in poverty in DC.