

## Community Legal Resources Network to Address Under-Served Communities

by Greta Boeringer

In spite of the fact that there are more lawyers per capita in the United States than in most other countries, most Americans lack access to the legal system. Studies done by the American Bar Association, the New York Bar Association and the Ford Foundation determined that 60% of the population who do not qualify for legal aid cannot find a lawyer to represent them—this at a time when judicially enforceable rights are expanding. Additionally, a range of community problems, such as family violence, are being transformed into legal issues. Some believe overuse of litigation undermines the ability of communities to engage in interdisciplinary problem solving for the complex social issues they face.

During the 1960s and 1970s, an attempt was made to meet the legal needs of under-served individuals and communities through federally funded legal services. Yet at the height of this funding, more than half of our citizens had no effective means of access to the justice system. Then in 1997 Congress cut one third of federal funding for legal services to the poor and eliminated all funds to national and state centers assisting local legal services lawyers. The dream of meeting the unmet legal needs of our society will not be achieved through federal funding.

Large law firms were once known for their traditions of community service. Today, harsh economic realities have forced law practice to become more business-like, and the traditions of community service are overshadowed by pursuit of the bottom line. Small firms and solo practitioners often lack the training, resources and organizational capacity to meet these legal needs.

These portentous shifts and changes in the legal profession are reflected in legal education. Many students enter law school hoping to do good, but graduate hoping to do well. They start out wanting to help others, to make a difference. (Atticus Finch, of *To Kill a Mockingbird* fame, is a hero and role model to many law students.) But after three years, students emerge from law school cynical, disillusioned, and convinced that professional service is simply impractical. The crushing debt that most graduates today bear upon graduation makes this seem even more certain.

Lawyers who, against the odds, do attempt to practice law in the public interest face many challenges. Often they do not have access to mentors, support staff, or libraries. Continuing Legal Education programs rarely address the legal and practice issues they face. And they often do not have the information they need to organize and finance their practices.

In 1997, George Soros, one of the world's most generous philanthropists, created a "Program on Law and Society" under the Open Society Institute. This program posits that "the strength of American Democracy depends on the ability of its legal system to function effectively and deliver justice. The program on Law and Society seeks to promote high standards of professional conduct and a commitment to safeguard

the American system of justice; to expand public and community service by law schools, students, and lawyers; to encourage all sectors of the profession to address the current failures of our system of justice to provide access, competent assistance, and fair resolution of disputes and to further understanding of the impact of economic [sic] and other changes in the profession."

The Open Society Institute made a grant under this program to four law schools in an effort to address these concerns. Under the grant, the four schools will develop Community Legal Resource Networks. These networks share the goal of developing new structures for law practice in under-served communities, facilitating community education and empowerment, and developing continuing legal education programs and law school courses to support practice in the public interest and to nurture a practicing setting that is financially, professionally, and personally satisfying.

The four schools involved are the CUNY School of Law (<http://clinic.law.cuny.edu/soros/Soros.html>), Northeastern University (<http://slaw.neu.edu/public/new/1998fall/soros.htm>), St. Mary's University of San Antonio (<http://lawplan.stmarytx.edu>), and the University of Maryland School of Law (<http://sunspot.net/cgi-bin/editorial/story.cgi?storyid=1050000213583>).

Each school brings unique strengths to the program, and each has a different set of problems to solve in implementing the program. Each law school has developed a program tailored to its unique characteristics and sharing the same value: the expansion of community service by law schools and lawyers. The CUNY project included funding for a law librarian.

CUNY's Community Legal Resources Network consists of three practice groups of attorneys focusing on family law, immigration, and general practice. These practice groups meet regularly and are linked by Web site technology that includes forms and legal research links. Continuing legal education programs are being developed to meet the specific needs of the practice groups. They will also have after-hours access to the law library and the services of the Community Legal Resources Network Law Librarian.

Northeastern University has developed considerable expertise through its Domestic Violence Institute and the Urban Law and Public Policy Institute, as well as

professional and community connections. The program will link public interest practitioners in these areas with law school faculty, students, and resources to create interdisciplinary specialized collaborative practices. Seminars will be offered to a mix of practitioners and students and a virtual community will be built linking practitioners across the state.

St. Mary's graduates are spread out over hundreds of miles, struggling to serve some of the poorest communities in the nation. In response, a computer network has been set up allowing these attorneys access to a range of computer support—including forms and simple briefs, e-mail, chat rooms, business management information for the solo practitioner, and continuing legal education. In addition, a mentoring program, research assistance, a legal hotline, and mediation facilities will be available.

The University of Maryland has placed a demonstration law office in the critically under-served neighborhood of Park Heights in Baltimore. This office will serve the needs of regular folks and support lawyers in small community-oriented practices.

All four models are working toward making community-based practices more efficient and successful by providing resources only available to those practicing in large firms or government offices. The projects also will develop sources of income, which benefit the community.

Significantly for law librarians, funding was included in the grant for a part time librarian at the CUNY law school site. Libraries and librarians are one of the precious resources that are often unavailable to lawyers practicing in the public interest. Some law

schools do allow their graduates to use the law school libraries, and this is one way law schools already support lawyers practicing in the public interest. Unfortunately, even this minimal practice is not universal among law schools.

The Community Legal Resources Network Law Librarian at CUNY finds herself in an academic setting, but she is serving 30 hard-working practicing attorneys. It is like being a law firm librarian at a law school! Fortunately, the CUNY Law Library was developed as a first-rate firm library and has many of the practice materials needed to support these diverse practices.

Law librarians have an important role to play in preserving the traditional community values that have made the legal profession great and created the democracy it serves. Whatever our setting—firm, law school, agency, or court—a crisis is affecting the lawyers we serve and the society we live in. There is more at stake here than just our jobs.

Maybe this proposal for a new role for law schools will be the beginning of the transformation of legal education in America. Maybe it will be a brief experiment like federally funded legal services. Maybe each of us can find a way to contribute to the changes needed so our legal system really can deliver “justice for all.”

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