

Law Schools and Community Lawyers

ABA Division for Legal Services Dialogue

By Deborah Howard

There is no question but that the dream of meeting the legal needs of underserved individuals and communities through federally funded legal services has not been, and is not likely to be, met. The lack of access to the legal system remains an urgent problem. Most current efforts under way to address the unmet legal needs in our communities involve expanding *pro bono* and government-funded legal services. The Law School Consortium Project, funded by the Open Society Institute, is aimed at another potential resource: solo and small-firm practitioners.

The purpose of this Project is to enable learning about ways that law schools, in new relationships with solo and small-firm practitioners, can help address the unmet legal needs of low and moderate income individuals and communities.

The four member law schools served by the Project's Central Staff - City University of New York School of Law; Northeastern University School of Law; University of Maryland School of Law; and St. Mary's University School of Law - have developed programs (also funded by the Open Society Institute) to help community-based lawyers develop practices that are economically viable, and professionally and spiritually satisfying. Each school has created a "Community Legal Resource Network" (CLRN), the vehicle by which these schools are providing resources and services to solo and small firm lawyers engaged in community-based law practices.

Each member school CLRN was designed to break down the private/public distinction in the delivery of legal services to traditionally underserved communities, to transform the relationship between law schools and their graduates in solo and small firm practices, and to use community-based practices as the concrete experiences from which to re-envision law and lawyering for the next century.

The shared vision of the Consortium's member schools is the development of successful and sustainable community-based practices that are nurtured and supported by law schools. Each member school has selected a different approach to enable the testing and evaluation of various models with the goal of creating a menu of "best practices" for review and selection by other law schools around the country. Despite their various approaches, all of the CLRNs share the same overarching strategies for accomplishing their shared vision (see below). Each of the member school CLRNs provide examples of how law schools can extend "longitudinally" into the community by supporting law graduates' practices and demonstrate various ways that law schools can play a significant role in fostering community-based lawyering. These member schools hope that, by helping solo and small firm practitioners, they will be able to increase the number and quality of the practitioners delivering legal services. They envision that the success of these models will serve to significantly impact legal education, the delivery of legal

services, and the role of law schools in instilling a sense of professionalism among law graduates.

Included among the services and resources provided by these Community Legal Resource Networks (CLRNs) are: faculty and practitioner mentors; access to library and web-based resources; affordable, relevant continuing legal education courses; training in law office management; joint purchasing discounts; referral opportunities; education about and support for the use of technology to help make their practices more efficient; and opportunities to network with other community-based solo and small firm practitioners.

Each of the member law schools strives to:

- develop new structures for law practice in underserved communities;
- facilitate community education and empowerment;
- experiment with non-litigation models for resolving disputes;
- create opportunities for discussion of ethical issues involved in community-based law practices;
- provide information and curriculum for continuing legal education programs, as well as law schools' substantive, professional responsibility and clinical courses; and
- nurture practice settings for law graduates that are financially, professionally and personally satisfying.

The CUNY Law School CLRNs were organized as a Practice Group model in which eight to ten solo and small firm community-based lawyers were organized into the following four groups: (1) the Family Law Group; (2) the Immigration Practice Group; (3) the General Practice Group, and, most recently, (4) the New Practice Development Group (for practitioners just beginning to develop their own solo and small law firms to serve low and moderate income individuals and communities).

Northeastern Law School has developed two CLRNs, one focusing on domestic violence and the other on economic development. The Economic Development CLRN focuses on helping solo and small practitioners who serve low income, inner-city neighborhoods to provide high quality economic development services to their clients. Project Staff provide network members with marketing and firm practice management training.

The Domestic Violence CLRN has a different format. This CLRN brings together senior family law practitioners with expertise in domestic violence cases, less experienced practitioners, and students with a background in domestic violence advocacy and an interest in family law litigation, to address substantive, procedural, and advocacy skills in family law, with a particular focus on domestic violence cases. The seminar serves to build the skills of all involved, build community among practitioners, and provide students with access to that community, even before they graduate. And, the seminar increases the level and quality of services to women seeking representation, and strengthens the bonds between the law school and the relevant professional community.

The University of Maryland has created Civil Justice, Inc., a demonstration law office and a CRLN. The demonstration law office's two primary specialties (consumer/home equity defense and economic, housing, and community development) were selected based on a statewide legal needs survey to identify the unmet legal needs of low and moderate income individuals and communities. The goals of the demonstration law office and CLRN are to model best practices for small and solo law firms, and to provide a broad range of support services to lawyers who represent low and moderate income communities, organizations, and individuals. In addition to representing members of the underserved Baltimore community in which it is located, Civil Justice provides case referrals, education, consultation, and a variety of other support services to the Network members.

St. Mary's University School of Law has created a sophisticated Internet "virtual" network through which it provides resources and services to its solo and small firm graduates in South Texas. The St. Mary's CLRN, the People's Legal Assistance Network (PLAN), provides graduates with access to a state-of-the-art website which has legal resources, on-line legal forms, legal document software, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and a web-based e-mail and calendaring system. PLAN also provides its members with access to faculty and practitioner mentors to help with substantive and procedural issues.

The meetings of the law school CLRN network members provide practitioners with a vehicle to counteract the isolation experienced by many solo and small firm practitioners. Group members meet regularly and communicate via e-mail and phone. Through these connections, CLRN members have been able to develop a network of fellow community-based practitioners, discuss cases and practice issues, create practice synergies, share valuable information, and provide each other with referrals and emotional support. The group meetings support the members' professional development by providing opportunities for reflection, developing expertise, and tapping into creative initiatives, while maintaining the autonomy of the small firm practitioner. And, the CLRNs provide the network members with mentoring and access to law school faculty expertise.

Comments from CLRN members include:

"CLRN has been very helpful to my firm in providing stimulating conversations among the members...providing referrals and giving my firm hardware and software that have now become indispensable to our day-to-day operations."

"CLRN has provided me the luxury of a law firm; I now have a group of lawyers...with whom I can discuss strategies, procedural issues, legal issues, etc. I am not alone out there."

As the member school CLRNs develop, it is hoped that they will serve as models that can be replicated and sustained at other law schools across the country. Some question whether it is an appropriate role for law schools to move beyond the traditional clinical structure and provide resources to *law graduates* to help them deliver legal services.

However, it is believed that these CLRNs provide at least four benefits to the law schools that house them. They serve: (1) as a means to provide visible support to law school alumni; (2) as mechanisms to assist graduates with career development and planning and provide a realistic opportunity for them to practice public interest law in a private practice setting; (3) as a recruitment vehicle to attract applicants interested in pursuing community-oriented work after graduation; and (4) as a resource to help faculty develop relevant, courses that will enhance the law school's curriculum.

The Central Staff of the Law School Consortium project, which is independently funded by the Open Society Institute, coordinates communication between the member schools; serves as a clearinghouse of information about the activities of the member school and related projects; develops and maintains relationships with other law schools, bar associations, and related projects; and conducts research with the member law schools on evaluation and replication.