

## **Maximizing Community and Interdisciplinary Impact: The Civil Practice Clinic at the Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law**

---

**By Carrie Hagan, Director, Civil Practice Clinic and Clinical Associate Professor of Law**

### **Introduction**

The Civil Practice Clinic (CPC) at Indiana University's Robert H. McKinney School of Law has been in existence for nearly thirty years. In its early years the clinic was run out of a non-profit and the law school, and once a new law school was completed, given its own clinic office space with a separate security entrance in 2001. Currently the CPC is one of seven clinics at the law school, the other six focusing on criminal defense, wrongful conviction, appellate advocacy, immigration, health and human rights and disability. The CPC is included in two graduation certificate programs (Environmental and Natural Resources Law as well as Advocacy Skills) and exists as part of a larger skills curriculum in addition to courses such as Trial Practice, Lawyering Practice (focus on pretrial and drafting), Interviewing and Counseling, Mediation and Negotiations. The mission of the clinic is multi-faceted: to give students a pedagogically sound and inspirational learning environment; to positively impact the surrounding community; and to provide competent, thoughtful and zealous representation to as many low income clients as possible each semester.

### **Community Partners and Processes**

Throughout the years, the CPC has had several community partners, the longest standing one of which is Indiana Legal Services (ILS), a non-profit organization that once housed the clinic in its early stages. In addition to ILS, the clinic also has formed partnerships with The Julian Center (a nationally recognized domestic violence shelter/counseling center); Muslim Alliance of Indiana (a local nonprofit focused on five areas of community impact: justice, interfaith, youth, hunger and engagement); Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic (a

local non-profit specializing in indigent representation); Indiana Youth Group (a local non-profit specializing in youth programming and events for LGBT youth); Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence (a state-wide organization working on domestic violence issues); Center for Victim and Human Rights (a local non-profit working in the areas of immigration and domestic violence for victims of domestic violence); Marion County Court 21 (domestic violence) and Court IV-D (child support enforcement); and the Indiana University School of Social Work, among others.

All of the community partners are not only able to send case referrals, but also brainstorm with the clinic students as to projects that need researching, areas of impact advocacy and identifying gaps in services. The relationship with the two specific courts has allowed the clinic to establish two fixed dockets each week where all clinic cases can be scheduled. This scheduling process allows for all involved to easily identify clinic cases/clients, concentrates the amount of student/legal supervisor time in court and enables case outcomes to occur prior to the end of each semester. Students are thus better able to accommodate their scheduled hearings, as well as avoid all holiday and summer breaks. Accepted cases are generally of a fixed duration so that students can take several each semester without being overwhelmed, competently learn specific areas of the law and see their cases from beginning to end.

### **Current Operations**

Currently the clinic enrolls eight students a semester. The students must have completed at least 45 hours of their law school education as well as a professional responsibility/ethics course. Students are given an opportunity to re-enroll for later semesters for additional credit and mentoring incoming students. Class is held twice a week, with one class being devoted to the substantive law involved in the cases as well as trial skills, and the second focusing on case/client issue reflection via group case rounds. Accepted cases cover civil protection orders, divorces, child support modification/emancipation, guardianships, housing, small claims, and other miscellaneous civil matters as needed.

Two fixed dockets where cases can be heard and scheduled have been arranged with the local courts. Tuesday mornings consist of intake and assistance with child support enforcement petitions to modify or emancipate child support orders, frequently for persons on social security disability who are having their monthly check heavily garnished for child support payments. This docket was created after several years of taking cases with the above issue from ILS, but having hearings spread throughout the week. By connecting with the child support enforcement prosecutorial office and the judicial officers in the court, a fixed day and time was set for all clinic cases to be heard, in exchange for doing moderate intake and referrals as could be accommodated. A second docket was also created in the main domestic violence protection order court through a partnership with The Julian Center, the Muslim Alliance of Indiana and the Center for Victim and Human Rights. All domestic violence cases are heard and scheduled for Thursday afternoons. The domestic violence docket allows clinic students to directly represent petitioners seeking orders of protection as well as assist with other family or civil matters as well.

### **Interdisciplinary Growth**

Upon noticing that law students were having difficulty connecting clients to services and digesting the emotional content of their cases, and similarly that social work students were needing more understanding of the law and legal processes, a partnership was formed with the Indiana University School of Social Work to create an interdisciplinary environment where law and social work students could learn from and work with each other. Via a Curriculum Enhancement Grant awarded by the Indiana University Center for Teaching and Learning, and support from both schools, the clinic was made officially interdisciplinary in the spring semester of 2011. A model was thus created and implemented allowing both Masters in Social Work (MSW) students and law students to enroll in the clinic each spring, where they share all classes and are paired on cases for holistic client representation and assessment. In addition to sharing their work and academics, students develop client materials for the clinic and research issues affecting client populations and create action plans for addressing barriers.

When implementing the interdisciplinary partnership model, a blended curriculum was created to focus on skills each student set needs for working with clients. To increase the competency of the law students, social work theories of motivational interviewing, systems theory, cultural competence and strengths perspective are all introduced. Similarly, to familiarize social work students with the demands of litigation, lessons on trial preparation and procedure as well as court processes/expectations are explained. Students are organized into pairs based upon weekly availability, and required (with client permission) to conduct the initial client interview together, with any assessment/referrals and representation occurring as the pair sees fit following that first meeting. In addition to the above, the curriculum also focuses on ethical issues of each profession (and what happens when they intersect), poverty, office procedures and protocols and self-care, among other topics.

### **Future Directions**

The creation of both the fixed dockets and the interdisciplinary collaboration allow for expanded growth in several areas. Firstly, more fixed dockets can be created in areas where there are gaps in services and demonstrated student interest. An example of this can be found in the local small claims court. Currently landlord tenant disputes/evictions are heard each day. Landlords typically have representation or are able to adequately represent themselves pro se, however no one local legal services agency has a specific practice group or enough resources assigned to assist tenants with issues of eviction defense, among others. Currently the clinic is developing a tenant information helpline which can be staffed by first year law students, CPC and MSW students, and which will offer an assessment of a tenant's situation under the law and any advice that goes along with it, when permitted. This helpline will not only assist tenants in identifying their rights but will open up experiential learning opportunities for first year law students and allow documentation of client issues to be collected for the later creation of a court docket assisting tenants with those issues. Expansion into the areas of mediation and limited family representation are also a goal, provided that concrete parameters and dockets can be established.

Secondly, with the creation of additional dockets, and thus clinic areas of concentration, ideally eight students will be enrolled in each identified concentration, with additional supervising attorneys assisting with supervision and cases. For example, once the clinic has four established concentration dockets (i.e. domestic violence, child support, mediation and small claims) each concentration docket will enroll eight students to staff and work the cases/clients involved in their assigned docket. Ideally all concentrations will share the same course class, which will allow for shared learning and group continuity throughout the semester. Not only will more students enrolling increase the overall client base being served, but it will expose more students to experiential learning, thereby increasing the population of new graduates who have mastered some confidence in working with clients and court systems. Future interdisciplinary collaborations are also a goal, for example developing a partnership with the undergraduate Latino Studies department to increase access to services and decrease client language barriers.

Community impact, student growth and effective client representation are all part of the past, present and future of the CPC. By nurturing and creating partnerships, maintaining an interdisciplinary focus and flexibly adapting to changing times and client needs, the CPC will continue to be a driving force in both legal education and the surrounding community. For more information or to encourage a student to apply for our program, please visit: <http://mckinneylaw.iu.edu/practice/clinics/clinics-list.html>.

