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Law Project pairs legal students, lawyers in effort to help needy

By **DOUG SHERWIN**, The Daily Transcript
Tuesday, December 20, 2005

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While helping with the University of California, San Diego's student-run free medical clinic in downtown San Diego, Ellen Beck realized two things. Medical students are bright, but even the brightest doctors-in-training aren't equipped to answer legal questions.

So the clinical professor called a colleague at the California Western School of Law, Linda Morton, to find a solution.

The ensuing brainstorming session produced the California Western Community Law Project, which began advising its first clients in October.

The pro bono initiative operates on Monday nights at the First Lutheran Church in downtown San Diego. It pairs law students at California Western with practicing attorneys to provide basic legal advice for individuals who cannot afford access to the justice system.

"It's been fantastic," said San Diego health care attorney Anaheeta Kolah, the program's volunteer executive director. "I've been really surprised with how well it's been received by the community."

At Morton's request, Kolah, 31, began developing the program last December soon after earning her law degree from Cal Western.

While UCSD's medical clinic can handle dental care, acupuncture and pharmacy needs, it was ill prepared for the barrage of legal questions posed by the needy clients.

"(Beck) thought a legal clinic would be the perfect addition to provide one-stop shopping for the low-income, homeless and immigrant population of San Diego," Kolah said.

Attorneys from the San Diego office of **Foley & Lardner LLP** have joined the program to provide assistance for the law students.

"It feels good to help someone out," said Christy Curtis, an associate with Foley in charge of organizing the firm's volunteers. "We're not saving the world, but I think it's doing a good service, and it's exciting for me and other attorneys to be a part of that. I find it rewarding."

The program is open every Monday from 5:30-8 p.m. with everyone being served on a first come, first served basis. In the first two months of the program, Kolah estimates they've seen an average of eight to 10 clients for each session.

"It's really taken off," Kolah said. "There's already a trust factor with the church being there. People have been coming in there for food and social service help for over 30 years and the medical clinic has been there for eight years, so that has really helped."

The questions mainly deal with confusion over Medicare and Medicaid billings to filling out social security disability forms. Attorneys and students even field criminal law questions, such as how to get access to criminal records.

"It's a real range of things," Curtis said. "One woman came in who received a letter from Medicare, saying they were going to bill her \$83. We figured out there was a billing error."

The students sign in the clients, walk them through the waiver process and try to define the problem. The student will then confer with the attending attorney to decide the best course of action.

In some cases, Curtis said, the lawyer will sit with the student as they interview a client.

"It's such a new program, it's pretty fluid right now," Curtis said. "It's definitely a collaborative process. In addition to providing services to low-income individuals, it gives students the opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom to real law, and see how the law assists people."

While it's more of a referral service (attorneys don't represent clients in court), it could grow to be much more.

"We're hoping by this time next year we can expand funding and services," Kolah said. "It is an issue of having enough resources."

"We hope to get to where we can provide actual legal representation in the future and have the students also provide representation under the supervision of an attorney. USD has a similar model with their immigration clinic."

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