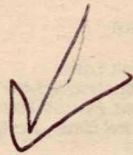


Upfront

Local news, information and analysis



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Champion of the poor to close doors

Financial difficulties end law project's effort

by Don Kazak

For 18 years, the East Palo Alto Community Law Project has provided legal services to East Palo Altans who otherwise couldn't afford a lawyer. Come Sept. 1, those residents will have to look elsewhere.

Because of continuing financial difficulties, the law project will close its doors Aug. 31.

Founded in 1984 by Stanford law students, the law project has been an institution in East Palo Alto almost dating back to the incorporation election in 1983.

The law project, with five or more young attorneys serving as legal advocates for the poor and otherwise disenfranchised, has been supported over the years by the Stanford Law School, although the project was an independ-

ent, nonprofit effort.

"It's very hard to do fund raising for lawyers," said Peggy Stevenson, the law project's executive director and one of its attorneys. "The board took a hard look at what our prospects were."

The law project's board of directors voted Monday night to close the project down.

"The decision by the board to close comes as much as surprise to us as it did to others," said Buzz Thompson, vice dean of the

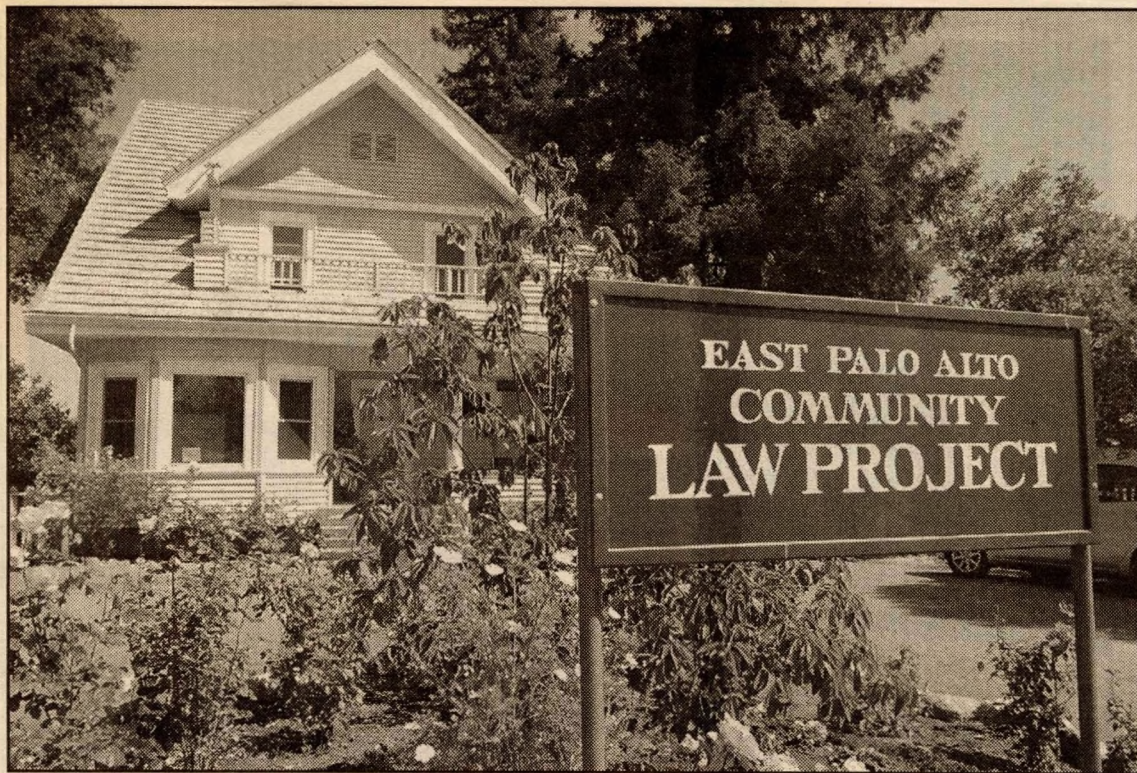
Stanford Law School. The law school provided \$350,000 of the law project's \$850,000 budget over the last year.

Thompson said the same level of financial support from the law school is likely to go into a new community law clinic the school hopes to open in East Palo Alto by Sept. 1, when the law project closes.

Thompson said it is too early to tell what areas of law the new clinic will cover, but

(continued on page 7)

Upfront



David Neville

The East Palo Alto Community Law Project, founded in 1984, will close its doors Aug. 31 because of financial difficulties.

Law project

(continued from page 3)

housing law will certainly be one of them. However, with less than half the financial support the law project now enjoys, Stanford's new community clinic can not provide all the services the project currently offers.

The law project has a staff of 14, including five full-time attorneys and several other consulting attorneys. In addition to tenant-landlord issues, the law project provides government benefit and small-claims court information, obtains restraining orders in cases of domestic violence, and has an immigration law attorney.

Stevenson said her biggest worry now is finding a legal resource to defend tenants from unjust evictions. "They may not do any eviction defense," Stevenson said of the planned Stanford law clinic.

The law project, which had 857 clients last year, does a lot of eviction defense work, Stevenson said. "When a tenant complains, they get

a notice to leave. That's a big part of what we do."

East Palo Alto Mayor Duane Bay said the law project's services must be replaced.

The law project has been a prominent fixture in the city for almost 20 years. It has represented tenants in battles against unscrupulous landlords — winning a \$775,000 settlement in 1994 when a property owner had refused to fix rundown apartments — and has also assisted small businesses.

But the law project's presence has been greater than just filing lawsuits and offering legal advice. Its attorneys have been part of public policy discussions in the city for years, offering advice to the City Council on sometimes difficult issues.

For instance, the City Council passed a law in November 2000 that prohibited property owners from refusing to rent to tenants who had federal Section 8 housing vouchers. A growing problem at the time, when the rental housing market was overheated, was that landlords preferred to rent to tenants who didn't

have federal subsidies.

But, with the advocacy and advice of the law project, the City Council made that discriminatory practice illegal.

"They provide a very valuable service," Bay said. "Everyone's going to have to come to the table to figure out what to do."

In a letter that went out this week to the many friends and supporters of the law project — including dozens of attorneys at Palo Alto's biggest law firms — Stevenson and Carlos Romero, the chairman of the law project's board of directors, wrote: "While the passing of the Law Project is a sad consequence of these difficult times, past work survives in the hearts and minds of those whose lives the Law Project has touched."

Thompson said that Stanford Law School will be doing everything it can to have a community clinic up and operating by Sept. 1. "We're looking for a location now, and starting the hiring process," he said. ■

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