



Street Forum

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Second Generation of Legal Service

Filling the need for law advice in East Palo Alto

By Catherine Crump

After 18 years of serving the local low-income community, the East Palo Alto Community Law Project closed its doors last August due to lack of funds. The Law Project, founded as a collaborative effort between Stanford law students, Stanford law school and East Palo Alto community members, had been the only provider of free legal services located in East Palo Alto. The closing of the Law Project prompted concern that local low-income people would go without any legal advice. Fortunately, two new legal services offices are opening in East Palo Alto to help meet that need. Stanford students will play an active role in both of them.

After the Law Project closed, Stanford Law School decided to open its own legal services organization in East Palo Alto. Stanford hired Peter Reid, a longtime attorney at the Legal Aid Society of San Mateo, to serve as its first clinic director. When asked why Stanford thought that it was important for it to open a legal services office, Reid said, "There are two reasons. One is that Stanford wants to make the law school's abilities and services available to the community. The second is that it will provide a good clinical training experience for law students."

Reid said that while law students often gain a strong grasp of legal doctrine from their courses, hands-on experience gained through working at organizations like the Stanford Community Law Clinic provided training in the real-world application of the law. He added that, "one of the things people have said is that you get out of law school with a strong grasp of legal theories, but not the foggiest idea of how to find a courthouse. The

clinic will expose students to the practical side of law."

The Stanford Community Law Clinic is still deciding which practice areas it will focus on. Under consideration are housing law, workers' rights, government benefits, immigration law, family law, and community economic development. Though the clinic will probably offer volunteer opportunities to undergraduates eventually, Reid said that it has not been decided how the clinic will incorporate undergraduate work.

Another new legal services organization is Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto. Community Legal Services began as a grassroots effort. After the Law Project announced in May that it would close at the end of August, community leaders sprung into action to have a law office in place by the time the Law Project closed. Katy Henrikson, who directs the office's immigration practice, said, "The community, especially the non-profit leaders and former clients, but even people who had been sued by the Law Project, felt that the community really needed this type of law office."

Currently, Community Legal Services runs three projects. Henrikson runs the project focusing on immigration law. She said that her mission is to, "inform, empower, and assist clients with their legal problems." She noted that in the area of immigration, clients often fall victim to misinformation concerning the United States' complex immigration law. Simply doing community outreach and providing accurate information is a key part of the immigration practice, Henrikson said.

A second area of practice for Community
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EPA Legal Services

Legal Services is tenants' rights. Low-income clients who come to Community Legal Services commonly have housing problems such as landlords who refuse to make necessary repairs or who will not return security deposits. The Community Legal Services' bilingual staff can help clients negotiate solutions to their problems.

Third, Community Legal Services runs the Volunteer Attorney Program ("VAP"). Henrikson said, "VAP is a program in which law students do preliminary screening of almost any legal problem, write up the facts, and then the cases are farmed out to local private attorneys." Thus, VAP leverages the resources of the larger community to the benefit of its low-income members.

The types of cases students handle through VAP are as diverse as the legal problems of the low-income community. Since many of Community Legal Services' clients are recent immigrants, language-related legal problems arise frequently. "A typical VAP case would, for example, involve a Spanish-speaking client who negotiated a car contract with a Spanish-speaking sales person, but signed a contract written in English," Henrikson said. "The client was under the impression that he was buying a car, but the fine print in the contract explains that he was leasing the car." Through the VAP program, a volunteer attorney could take the

case for free and assist the client with his legal problem.

Henrikson said that both law students and undergraduate volunteers are a vital part of the work of Community Legal Services. Many law students participate by conducting the initial client intake interviews for the VAP program. The housing and immigration projects also rely on law student assistance. Undergraduates have worked on a number of projects, including Community Legal Service's first legislative victory. Henrikson gave credit to undergraduates for doing much of the work putting together a proposal to persuade the City of East Palo Alto to accept a Mexican consular ID as a valid form of identification. The City recently agreed to do so.