

Activist law project serving poor to close

Founded by Stanford students in 1984, the clinic helped clients in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park grappling with housing issues, workplace injuries, immigrant rights and other legal problems.

By Kim Vo

Mercury News

For the Peninsula's poor, it is hard to find a more dependable advocate than the East Palo Alto Community Law Project. For 18 years, the agency has fought rent increases, education inequities, harsh welfare reform measures and a host of other issues that have plagued low-income communi-

ties.

But not for much longer.

The project's board of directors voted this week to end the law project by Aug. 31, citing money problems.

The law project, which consists of mostly attorneys and students from nearby Stanford Law School, provides legal advice and re-

presentation to those in the community who otherwise can't afford it.

"In recent years, the project had struggled really hard to have enough money to pay its bills," said board member Steven Dinkelspiel.

In response, Stanford University — whose students founded the project in 1984 — will open a community law clinic on Sept. 1. Details of the new clinic are sketchy, said Buzz Thompson, vice dean at the law school, but it will be located in either East Palo Alto or east Menlo Park, the same communities served by the

law project.

The law project is also trying to find sympathetic agencies to adopt some of its other programs, such as eviction defense and working to stop predatory lending.

"I guess the only silver lining to this — I'm trying really hard to look for silver linings — is there are many ways agencies and people can work together," said executive director Margaret "Peggy" Stevenson.

It's unclear how large Stanford's

See **PROJECT**, Page 5B

LOCAL THURSDAY, MAY 16, 2002 SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

PROJECT | Students to form new law clinic

Continued from Page 1B

clinic will be or what projects other agencies can shoulder. Community members were alarmed at the closing, consoling each other over telephone and e-mail about what one activist called a "community tragedy."

Stanford students founded the law project on Bay Road to provide both a service to the community and a chance for students to work with clients instead of simulating legal cases in class, said Dinkelspiel, who was a student founder.

Inspiring advocates

Over the years, the project provided assistance on issues ranging from housing and immigrant rights to workplace injuries. It also championed causes that fell outside traditional legal boundaries, such

as helping find funding sources for a supermarket in East Palo Alto.

"I'm one of the thousands that have been impacted, or, in my case, transformed," said William Webster. On Jan. 14, 1989 — he remembers the date as if it were his wedding — he attended a community meeting at the law project office to discuss protecting rent control. He left a changed man, a community advocate.

"It was the center of organizing for the community in so many ways," he said.

Renee Glover, the project's former executive director, heard the news Tuesday. On Wednesday, she could barely discuss the imminent closing without choking up. One of the law project's attorneys had inspired her to go to law school.

"I'm stunned," she said. "It was 18 years. Eighteen years

founded on the blood and sweat of a lot of talented law students."

One reason the law project has such strong community ties is that it grew alongside East Palo Alto, which incorporated in 1983, Dinkelspiel said. But the financial support has never measured up to the community support.

Inconsistent funding

Stanford provided partial funding — \$350,000 this year — so its students could get experience at the law project.

However, operating expenses and salaries for 14 people cost \$850,000. The project has been sustained through grants and private donors, but that money is inconsistent.

Contact Kim Vo at kvo@sjmercury.com or (650) 688-7571.