Gimme Shelter: Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic Helps Create Homes for Elderly, Disabled, Working Poor

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Law School Report

Gimme Shelter

Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic helps create homes for elderly, disabled, working poor

Joe and June Adams play cards in the community room at the Trinity Appartments in East Aurora

The Law School at the University at Buffalo is rapidly earning a national reputation for its program in affordable-housing and community development law.

"Since 1987, our faculty and students have been instrumental in partnering $75 million in public and private funds with agencies and developers who build or rehab housing for the elderly, the disabled and working poor families," said George M. Hezel, clinical professor and director of the Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic.

The clinic's faculty and students use legal tools at their disposal to link funding sources and private and public agencies. As a result of their efforts, which are primarily oriented to learning and teaching law, at least 1,000 housing units exist today in the community that otherwise would not have been available. And more are in the planning stages.

"Attractive apartment complexes, townhouses, row houses and single-family dwellings have either been built or carved out from our..."
dated housing projects or residences of religious orders who came to Buffalo at the turn of the 19th century to serve waves of European immigrants," Hezel explained.

The projects have been accomplished working with community partners such as the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, members of the Franciscan and Jesuit orders, the Polish Community Center and Delta Development of Western New York, a not-for-profit developer.

They have included Ellicott Town Center, a complex of townhouses and apartments at Michigan and Clinton streets; a tidy row of townhouses on Buffalo's East Side that is a haven for abused spouses and their children; St. Ann's Apartments at the corner of Emslie Street and Broadway, a former Jesuit residence that now accommodates 19 affordable apartments and earned a prestigious State Historic Preservation Award; and Francis John Apartments, 62 units at Broadway and Memorial Drive located in two large buildings that previously housed a major furniture store.

While most of this housing stock is located in Buffalo, some is in the suburbs.

Clinic students learn the legal techniques and strategies involved from start to finish. "They begin with the design and analysis of feasibility studies that identify the type and location for housing needed most, do a cost analysis, write the proposal, apply for funding and oversee the finished proposal through operation and sale," Hezel noted.

The success of the clinic has contributed to the Affordable Housing and Community Development Law concentration at the Law School. Second- and third-year law students who select this concentration complete 15 credits of related courses. Courses include tax and real estate finance law, state and local government law, corporate law, land use regulation, and poverty and labor law.

Students in this concentration also are required to complete nine credits selected from a “menu” of an additional 14 core courses that include the Community Economic Development Clinic, Affordable Housing Clinic, non-profit corporations, affordable housing development and acquisition transactions.

"Concentration students also must research and write at least one paper focusing on community development under an adviser's supervision," Hezel added.

These papers are written for presentation in classes and are published from time to time in the American Bar Association's Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law, which is housed at the UB Law School.

"We were the unanimous choice to have the journal at UB, outbidding 20 other law schools to win it," Hezel pointed out proudly, adding that "the UB program's growing reputation brings calls from other schools across the country who want to learn how we operate our clinic."

It has inspired students who have enrolled in the active, dynamic “can-do” clinic to specialize in this field of public-interest law.

"Our students come to see that public-service lawyers who are dedicated to a goal can influence the amount of decent, affordable housing in the community," Hezel said.

Some of the graduates of the clinic and concentration teach law and its techniques and strategies to law students elsewhere or work with community coalitions on building partnerships to create more decent, affordable homes and apartments across the country.

"People who live on fixed or limited incomes should be able to find decent, affordable housing in their communities," Hezel said. "I know how they feel because my four brothers and I grew up in public-housing projects in Buffalo. My dad was one of the working poor."

He predicted the need for decent, affordable housing will grow faster in the next decade as baby boomers get older and are unable to keep and live in their own homes.

"More people with disabilities now are encouraged to be active members of society and either live independently or in group settings and will need more options for low-cost, decent housing, too," Hezel noted.

Will there be enough affordable housing when it's needed? Hezel hopes so.

"All I can say is that we and other law schools are teaching our students how to use the law to address this growing need."