Clinic Helps People Secure Housing, Independence

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n a run-down section of city street in Niagara Falls, N.Y. — flanked by abandoned homes and across the street from a shuttered hospital — a dilapidated old dormitory for nurses is getting a new start as transitional housing for homeless women and their children.

The building's rehabilitation is being made possible, in large measure, by the efforts of University at Buffalo law students, who have fashioned an approach to affordable housing, which, based on helping nonprofit and community organizations obtain financing to create low-income and special-needs housing.

"Affordable housing is for students looking for more substantial elements of law beyond the flash of litigation," explains law professor George W. Hezel, director of the UB Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic. "These students learn to negotiate sensitive issues, plan and advocate for people, which is really 90 percent of what lawyers do — litigation doesn't spend all their time litigating."

The refurbished four-story building, opened in April by the YWCA of Niagara, brings to $150 million the amount of affordable housing financing secured by students and faculty members through UB's Affordable Housing Clinic, says Hezel, who has run the clinic for 17 years.

"The trick of this project was securing the financial aid," Hezel, who has run the clinic for 17 years, explains. "The project's operating budget is $2 million and the 20 new residents require $1 million a year."

"The state has been supportive, and the facility will replace and significantly enhance the small, closed courtyard playground, the new facility contains a family arts training center, educational facilities, and its entire budget will be raised.

The building site for Cornerstone Manor Transitional Housing facility, a new three-story residence for women who have substance-abuse problems and their children.

Julia A. Soto '95, who helped initiate the YWCA project, says, "We had a vision, it did't seem like it was going to happen at one point, but now it is. There's no other housing like this in the entire county."

In addition to one-, two- and three-bedroom suites, the new facility contains a daycare center and a culinary-arts training center, which prepares women for jobs in restaurants around and in the facility, located just a few blocks from the facility.

"This is not just housing," says Kathleen Granchelli, executive director of the YWCA of Niagara, who has spearheaded the project. "The most important component is moving families from dependence to independence. They have all the support services they need, in one facility, to move on to the next phase of life with dignity."

"This has been an amazingly successful collaboration with the UB Law School and several other partners," Granchelli adds. "We had a vision, it didn't seem like it was going to happen at one point, but now it is. There's no other housing like this in the entire county."

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Created in 1987, the UB clinic is the granddaddy of affordable housing clinics at U.S. law schools. Its national prominence is due to the clinic's ability to bring practical work experience to the classroom, while providing students with meaningful ways to improve their communities.

UB Law School also offers several other clinics, including one addressing family violence, the environment, elder law and securities.

"The UB Affordable Housing Clinic has long been recognized as an innovator and leader, with a record of outstanding accomplishments," says Robert Solomon, director of clinical studies at the Yale Law School. "I had the pleasure of meeting the clinic and I was incredibly impressed and inspired by the clinic's work."

With the YWCA project completed, the UB clinic is deeply involved in the "most challenging and ambitious project" in its history, according to Hezel. In partnership with the Buffalo City Mission, the UB clinic has secured $9.3 million in financing for a new three-story residence for women who have substance-abuse problems and their children. Construction of the 122-unit Cornerstone Manor Transitional Housing Facility, located on the edge of the Buffalo Medical Campus, will begin in April and is slated to be completed in February.

With its on-site medical, counseling and educational facilities, and its environment, family law and commercial law and family law clinics, the UB clinic provides a wide range of high-quality services.

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The building’s rehabilitation is being made possible, in large measure, by the efforts of University at Buffalo law students attracted to an unglamorous, roll-up-your-sleeves niche of law practice known as affordable housing, which focuses on helping nonprofit and community organizations obtain financing to create low-income and special-needs housing.

“Affordable housing is for students looking for more substantial elements of law beyond the flash of litigation,” explains law professor George W. Hezel, director of the UB Law School’s Affordable Housing Clinic. “These students learn to negotiate sensitive issues, plan and advocate for people, which is really 90 percent of what lawyers do — litigation is really 10 percent. Students don’t spend all their time litigating.”

The refurbished four-story building, operated in August by the YWCA of Niagara, brings to $150 million the amount of historic-preservation tax credits, “The trick of this project was securing funding for a dozen affordable-housing projects in the Buffalo area,” says Kathleen Granchelli, executive director of the YWCA. “We were able to bring $1 million in historic-preservation tax credits,” Hezel explains. “Finding additional funding for the project was challenging, but we were able to secure $1 million in historic-preservation tax credits.”

In addition to the one- and two-bedroom apartments, the new facility contains a closed courtyard playground, the new facility’s operating budget. The refurbished four-story building, operated in August by the YWCA of Niagara, brings to $150 million the amount of historic-preservation tax credits, and a dozen other housing projects in the Buffalo area.

Julia A. Solo ’95, who helped initiate the YWCA project, spoke at the conference. “The importance of affordable housing has been elevated because of the YWCA project,” says Robert Solomon, director of clinical studies at the UB Law School. “I had the pleasure several years ago of visiting with the clinic and I was incredibly impressed and inspired by the clinic’s work.”

With the YWCA project completed, the UB clinic is deeply involved in the “most challenging and ambitious project” in its history, according to Hezel. In partnership with the Buffalo City Mission, the UB clinic has secured $3.5 million in financing for the project, which will be located within the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus — will open the door to the future on development in the medical campus, which, in turn, spurs community development projects, Hezel says. “It’s a building block to a better city, a better society.”

“Julia A. Solo ’95, who helped initiate the YWCA project, spoke at the conference. “The importance of affordable housing has been elevated because of the YWCA project.” Moreover, demolition of the outdated 60-unit Cornerstone Manor — located within the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus — will open the door to the future on development in the medical campus, which, in turn, spurs community development projects, Hezel says. “It’s a building block to a better city, a better society.”

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