Companions in Safety: Clinic Project Makes It Easier for Abused Women to Access Care for Themselves and Their Pets

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School, the students and the bar."

As for the students, they are finding it helpful to get out of O’Brian Hall each week and take some first steps toward practicing the craft of lawyering.

“I jumped at the opportunity to become involved with the practicum, because I wanted to get as much practical experience as possible while still in law school,” says Stephanie Poray, a third-year student in the course. “I have found that there is nothing more valuable to me than this practical experience, and I learn best in such an atmosphere.

“Real-world experiences and situations create competent attorneys. These experiences take what we have learned in the classroom for the last 2½ years and transform it into something real, something that matters.”

Says her classmate Andrew Klehammer: “It is one thing to have professors tell you how the law works or even to experience a simulation like trial technique, but this cannot match the experience of sitting down with an attorney and preparing for an actual trial. To see how an attorney works through a case and to be able to collaborate on forming questions for cross examination or closing arguments is truly unique.”

And student Patrick Reinikainen says: “My experiences included meeting with clients, interacting with judges, drafting motions, and glean ing the pragmatic skills that will carry over to my career. It is critical that law students apply what they have learned in the first two years. The criminal law practicum provides that channel and connects students with seasoned criminal defense practitioners.”

Future law school practica will follow a similar model in other subject matter areas.

Companions in safety

Clinic project makes it easier for abused women to access care for themselves and their pets

The story repeats itself often: A woman in an abusive relationship stays in the home, often at severe risk to her own well-being, because she can’t bear to leave behind a beloved pet when she seeks shelter.

Pet owners will recognize the feeling -- people are deeply attached to their dogs and cats (and all sorts of other creatures), finding in them the affirmation and affection that every human being needs. Further, research shows that in violent homes, the abuser may threaten to harm the pet as a tactic of control.

Enter SUNY Buffalo Law School’s Women, Children, and Social Justice Clinic, which has begun a project to make it easier for women to seek safety by helping them to access caregiving for their pets as well.

The project has resulted in an online database available at http://law.buffalo.edu/familyviolence/petProject.asp. Organized by county, it lists programs for victims of violence that can house both victim and pet, and agencies that will accept pets for sheltering.

Says Clinical Professor Suzanne E. Tomkins, who directs the clinic: “We know firsthand from catastrophes like Katrina that individuals will not seek safety if they have to leave their pets behind. Our goal is to reduce a very real barrier for abused individuals seeking safety by knowing their pets are cared for and safe.”

Second-year law student Karalyn Rossi is working on the project through the clinic. She has created a PowerPoint presentation that details the challenges faced by targets of domestic violence who own pets, and some available solutions. Rossi is presenting this information to task forces on domestic violence in all eight counties of the 8th Judicial District of Western New York. The goal is to make prosecutors, domestic violence agencies and court representatives aware of the problem so that they can help targets of such violence find safety for themselves and their pets.

For example, some domestic violence shelters have a dedicated area for pets, either a room or a separate facility. Other programs have agreements with local animal shelters to house clients’ pets temporarily, or even place them in foster care for a time.

“We want to help them build capacity and assist them with legal issues that might arise,” Tomkins says. The legal issues are myriad, and this is the focus of the clinic students work on the project, she says. For example, liability issues arise when pets are housed in shelters for domestic violence victims. It’s also not well-known, Tomkins says, that pets can be included in an order of protection sought by the target of domestic violence.

The initiative grew out of three regional seminars hosted by the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services. The Law School clinic was commissioned to survey domestic violence agencies and animal shelters across the state and develop the database. The continuing project is supported by a grant from the Verizon Foundation.

Says Rossi: “This clinic project allows me to work in two areas of law that excite me – animal rights and domestic violence. I have two dogs I would have a hard time leaving. It is so rewarding to know that my research is being applied directly to help victims with pets as they seek shelter.”