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Easing the Transition: Students Step up for Those Adjusting to Life After Prison

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A new Law School practicum is putting students’ legal skills to use on behalf of an underserved group of clients: federal offenders who are completing their sentences and finding their way in life after prison.

The Post-Incarceration Reentry Practicum is a collaboration between the Law School and the Western District of New York’s Federal Reentry Court Program, a voluntary post-release program that provides newly released federal offenders with a range of support, including legal assistance, to help them stay out of trouble and get settled in jobs and housing. Starting with six students this fall semester and continuing in the spring, participants in the practicum are working with attorneys from the Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo to help resolve civil legal issues for these newly released offenders.

The instructors for the program are Monica Piga Wallace ’94, a Law School lecturer in the Legal Analysis, Writing and Research program, and Legal Aid attorney Paul Curtin. Professor Athena Mutua will also participate in the practicum.

Nationwide, over 150 prisoners each day are released from federal custody, Wallace says, and they face both legal and social barriers to successful reentry into society. The transition from life in prison to life at home poses many challenges for those individuals. As convicted felons, they may have difficulty finding adequate housing; they may be barred from certain types of employment; they may have issues with substance abuse, mental health, and child support or child custody arrangements. These barriers interfere with their ability to transition back into the community,” Wallace says. “Even individuals with the best of intentions will encounter legal and social obstacles that threaten to interfere with reintegration and increase the likelihood of recidivism. Reentry work seeks to identify and eliminate those barriers and create situations where newly released individuals can successfully rejoin society.

“This is an opportunity to give students real practical experience while fulfilling this unmet legal need. Experiential learning has been identified as essential to developing the legal skills needed to address the demands and challenges of practicing law. It’s a great marriage of the Law School’s desire to facilitate experiential learning and the school’s commitment to providing pro bono legal services.”

In addition to their classroom-based coursework, those in the practicum—all second- and third-year students—spend about 10 hours a week working under the supervision of Legal Aid attorneys representing participants in the Federal Reentry Court Program. For example, Wallace says, they might work to obtain a waiver for an offender who wants to reunite with his family living in federally subsidized housing, but is barred from doing so because of rules against felons’ living in subsidized apartments. Others may help resolve outstanding arrest warrants or seek modification of a child custody order. Some will work under practice orders in federal, state, city and family courts, and students will also participate in the biweekly Federal Reentry Court sessions run by U.S. Magistrate Judge Hugh B. Scott ’74.

Scott, whose program is one of about 40 administered by federal district courts nationwide, says that if of-
Kitty, kitty, kitty…

What to do with 90,000 wild cats?

Pro bono project seeks an answer

They’re called feral cats—entirely undomesticated—or “community cats,” friendly felines that troll the neighborhood for food and don’t live with a family in a home. To some, they’re a nuisance; to others, they’re a vital part of the urban ecosystem. And there are a lot of them: By some estimates, 40,000 to 90,000 unowned cats roam the streets of Buffalo.

The problem is, the city has no well-thought-out plan for dealing with these cats. Citizen complaints led the city’s Common Council to form a task force to address the issue. One member of that task force, Peter A. Reese ‘73, approached the Law School seeking legal help for the project.

The result was the development of the SUNY Buffalo Animal Law Pro Bono Project, with students working over the summer and continuing this fall researching the issue and putting together a draft model ordinance for lawmakers to consider.

“The students looked at what the science shows us happens in communities with free-roaming cats, the experience that other localities and national experts have had with ordinances, and how Buffalo works,” says Professor Kim Diana Connolly, vice dean for legal skills and director of clinical legal education, who oversees the project. “They found that no uniform standard exists for laws in this area, and, Connolly says, they hope to submit the draft ordinance to a national database to be shared widely.

Reese, a longtime advocate for animal welfare, says there are three possible avenues for dealing with unowned cats. The first is to try to catch and euthanize them. But, he says, “we’ve been trying that approach for at least 150 years, and it just doesn’t work.” Cats, he points out, are prolific breeders. The middle ground is to do nothing, and he says some studies have shown it’s the best course, recognizing that if all the wild cats were to disappear from a city, rats and other vermin would proliferate.

What Reese calls the most progressive approach is labeled TNVR—trap, neuter, vaccinate and release. “It requires some resources,” he says, “but we would like the Common Council to at least recognize the concept of TNVR. If they’re willing to support it, that’s good. We hope to shed some light on this and give the Common Council some options.” He says the task force will reach consensus on a recommendation and present it to the Council; public hearings would follow.

Of the law students’ involvement, he says, “I think it’s a fantastic opportunity for the students to do pro bono work and for the community to utilize their resources, to come up with solutions for problems like this.”

Student Ian Laing is writing the draft ordinance for the city task force. “Through this project, I have been able to read and analyze ordinances that have been passed in other jurisdictions,” he says. “Being able to read and decipher what some of the other ordinances mean and say is a major benefit.”

Connolly says, “It is a win-win when students can get experience while delivering a project that is needed in real-time for an actual project.”

The rising second- and third-year students did the work to help satisfy New York State’s new 50-hour pro bono requirement for Bar admission. The Law School wants to offer other such service experiences in many subject areas, in which professors or alumni “can get a group of students who can do meaningful work that will support necessary change in a limited time.” Interested parties can reach her at (716) 645-2092 or at kimconnolly@buffalo.edu.