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Doing even more good

Pro bono requirement will reinforce and expand Law School's public interest work

Starting next summer, law students who want to be admitted to the New York bar will face a new requirement: completion of 50 hours of pro bono legal work. For decades, well over half of the students who graduated from the SUNY system's only law school have already done such work and more. Now, plans are in place to help all SUNY Buffalo Law School students meet this new condition.

This new mandate, issued by Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman on Law Day 2012, has two purposes: providing future attorneys solid experience, while simultaneously giving underresourced clients access to legal advice. According to Vice Dean for Student Affairs Melinda Saran, "Students are eager to apply their law school learning through pro bono work, such as working with veterans in Genesee County and assisting refugees applying for asylum."

Dean Makau W. Mutua was the only law school dean to serve on the statewide advisory committee convened by the chief judge to issue recommendations for practicable implementation. "I was honored to serve on Judge Lippman's committee," Mutua says. "I thought it said a lot about the value that he places on SUNY Buffalo Law School as the state's public law school."

"The committee was open and receptive to the concerns and ideas of law schools in implementing the pro bono rule. I want to commend Judge Lippman for being forward-thinking and creating an opportunity for us to inculcate in law students the spirit and substance of public service for the underserved. I hope New York's becomes the model for other states."

The requirement will affect the Class of 2014 first, and current second-year students may start accruing pro bono



hours now. "This is a requirement for bar applicants, not a mandate on the Law School," says Connolly. "But many students enroll in our institution hoping to sit for the New York State bar exam, so we have indirect responsibility for assisting in compliance. Fortunately, we have a history of supporting students in completing similar work, so it was easy to roll out a plan to assist all students."

To ensure adequate opportunities for all its students to meet the pro bono requirement, SUNY Buffalo Law School has:

- Created a "community partners advisory committee" to work directly with traditional civil legal service providers, such as Neighborhood Legal Services, Legal Aid, Volunteer Lawyers Project, Legal Services for the Elderly, and others.
- Assessed the school's roster of service learning coursework, such as clinics, planning to make more opportunities available for students.
- Added practicum courses that count toward the requirement, including a Criminal Law Practicum, the new Healthy Homes Legal Practicum, and coming this fall, a practicum dealing with post-incarceration "re-entry" issues of released prisoners.
- Established a tracking system to help students find places to volunteer during the semester and over the sum-

mer and partnered with the Computer Assisted Legal Instruction organization to implement innovative approaches.

- Arranged with providers of legal research services to continue students' access to Lexis/Nexis, Westlaw and Bloomberg materials post graduation, while they're working to fulfill the pro bono requirement.

Multiple options in the regulations will support various pro bono options. For example, Connolly explains that a student working at a law firm over the summer can get pro bono credit for assigned work if the firm is not billing for the time. Students' work for judges and the district attorney also counts toward the requirement. The basic overall understanding, she says, is that the work must be both legal in nature (building houses for Habitat for Humanity wouldn't count, but drafting a legal document for that non-profit would), and supervised by licensed attorneys or law faculty.

And Saran points out the mandate also opens up for practicing lawyers, including Law School alumni, opportunities to get support for their pro bono efforts by working with students. The Law School stands ready to connect practitioners with students eager to meet the requirement. For information, visit the Law School's pro bono page at www.law.buffalo.edu/current/pro-bono.html.

Above, Diana Proske '03, right, discusses Neighborhood Legal Services at a recent job fair.