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Roger Williams University School of Law

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Newsroom

PBN Highlights Pro Bono Collaborative

In its special Law Focus issue, the Providence Business News takes a closer look at the unique partnerships comprising RWU Law's Pro Bono Collaborative.

From the PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS: "RWU, lawyers expand pro bono aid" by Denise Perreault,
PBN Staff Writer



Nov. 28, 2011: Few people will work for free, especially if a person spent thousands of dollars and an unknown amount of hard work to obtain a professional degree such as that required to practice law.

But lawyers, more than many other professionals, do offer services free of charge in the form of work commonly called "pro bono," aimed at helping indigent members of society deal with legal needs ranging from simple counseling to full-fledged representation in court cases.

The Roger Williams University School of Law in Bristol, the only law school in Rhode Island, wants to make certain pro bono work remains a priority in the state through its **Pro Bono Collaborative, part of the school's Feinstein Institute for Legal Service.**

The collaborative has law-school students working with practicing attorneys from private firms to resolve the legal problems of community-based, social-service agencies and their needy clients. The program is one of the few in the nation to formally partner students with private law firms and with community groups on a regular basis, according to the law school.

Since the program started five years ago, approximately 90 law-school students and 100 private attorneys from 11 firms have worked with 30 community groups to help about 200 individuals, according to **Eliza Vorenberg, director of the Pro Bono Collaborative at Roger Williams**.

Laurie Barron, executive director of the Feinstein center, explained that the Pro Bono Collaborative is one of several programs the institute offers students, who must complete at least 50 hours of public-interest service to graduate.

“Our goal is to teach students how to integrate pro bono work into an otherwise already-busy schedule,” Barron told Providence Business News. “Our hope is that our students will become pro bono leaders at their own firms [after graduation].” Students come to law school wanting to change the world, she noted, “and we want to make sure they still want to do that when they leave.”

As of 2008, 8 percent of the law school’s graduates took public-interest jobs after graduation compared to a national rate of 5.4 percent.

Stephen Prignano, partner with Edwards Wildman Palmer LLP in Providence (formerly Edwards Angell Palmer & Dodge), is a member of the Pro Bono Collaborative board and oversees the program at his firm.

The well-established law firm (founded in 1894) has no need to ramp up business by pursuing pro bono opportunities, so its involvement “is not intended to be a business driver,” Prignano said. “We take that responsibility [to help society] seriously. However, we do think it is good business to be a good corporate citizen.”

At Edwards Wildman, attorney Erica Lindberg works with the students and pointed out how often they are confined to classrooms, engaging in discussions mostly with fellow students and professors. The Pro Bono Collaborative gives them a chance to experience the practice of law and “hone their skills” in real-world settings, she said.



“Issue-spotting,” she said, is one skill

students can acquire through pro bono work. “This is when you have a client, he or she tells you a story and it’s your job as a lawyer to figure out what the law says can be done for this person,” Lindberg said. She is currently working with three Roger Williams students on two pro bono projects concerning housing and immigration issues.

The Pro Bono Collaborative as a whole is working on 19 projects, Vorenberg said. Projects generally fall into four categories: direct representation, nonprofit help, workshops and legislative advocacy. Anywhere from 10 to 15 students take part in the collaborative each year.

Of the 19 current projects, nine involve “direct representation” for individuals with problems that include criminal-record expunction, housing rights, special-education needs, domestic violence and guardianship.

Another six are concerned with nonprofit groups that, for instance, want to acquire 501(c) 3 tax-free status or recently purchased a building and need help with leasing arrangements, Vorenberg said. Also, a law-school student and an Edwards Wildman attorney write a monthly column about legal issues for “Street Sights,” a newspaper published by the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless.

The Pro Bono Collaborative might not be in existence today without the generosity of law-school donors.

The Rhode Island Foundation, for instance, has contributed a total of \$250,000 to the collaborative since its 2006 start, according to Vorenberg. “They really got us off the ground,” she said. Foundation funding is intended as seed money, she explained, and the collaborative will be “weaned off” it as other donors are identified, a common practice the foundation uses to eventually render fund recipients independent.

Well-known Providence attorney Mark Mandell, chairman of the law-school board, and his wife, fellow attorney **Yvette Boisclair,** gave \$250,000 in 2009 to the collaborative.

The Feinstein Institute for Legal Service was created in 1997 as an umbrella for public-interest programs at the law school. As of 2009, Roger Williams was one of 19 law schools in the nation that require public service to graduate. The Rhode Island Bar Association, with 5,000 members, also maintains an active pro bono program.

At Roger Williams, the Pro Bono Collaborative began in 2006, after the law-school leaders in 2004 became aware of “a lot of gaps” in the state’s existing pro bono programs, Barron said. The law school sent surveys to bar-association members in Rhode Island to discover the incentives and barriers to pro bono work.

What they found, Barron said, is most pro bono work in the state was being done by sole practitioners or lawyers in small firms who had been practicing law for 21 or more years. To do more pro bono service, they needed regular updates on pressing legal issues for the indigent and a person or entity to organize projects needing attention.

The Pro Bono Collaborative was established to answer those needs in large part by engaging the state’s larger law firms, Barron said, and is based on a similar program at the Public Interest Law Initiative in Chicago.

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