

## Service Learning Projects

Projects are on behalf of legal organizations or community groups and involve a real-world social injustice that is currently impacting people in Florida. Students will collaborate with the “client” organizations to promote positive change in laws or policies; innovate legal service delivery models to increase access to justice; and/or further social, racial, and economic justice.

A maximum of five students can sign up for Projects 1-6. A maximum of three students can sign up for Project 7. Students on each project will work as a team. Each project has background reading materials posted on TWEN. These readings are included to assist students in selecting a project and to provide project groups with basic information about the issues involved with their selected projects. Students should complete the readings *prior* to meeting with their supervising attorneys.

### ***PROJECT 1: Healthy Kids Medical-Legal Partnership***

Medical-legal partnerships (MLP) address health-harming legal needs that disproportionately affect people living in poverty. A health-harming legal need is a social, financial, or environmental problem that has a negative impact on a person’s health and that can be addressed through civil legal aid. This legal care is integrated into the delivery of health care and deeply engages health and legal partners in working together to address the social determinants of health. The number of MLPs is increasing in Florida and in the United States. The Eighth Judicial Circuit Bar Association and civil legal aid programs in Alachua County (Three Rivers Legal Services and Southern Legal Counsel) are investigating forming one or more medical-legal partnerships between legal services providers (with assistance of pro bono attorneys and law students) and local medical providers that assist low-income populations to integrate legal aid into the health care system.

Students who select this project will work with Dr. Rachel Coleman, a local pediatrician at UF Health Pediatrics, and other members of the medical and legal community to conduct a population, health, and legal landscape needs assessment (see pp. 11-14 of the MLP Toolkit available on TWEN) for a MLP targeting children who have experienced trauma. The needs assessment is the first step in forming a MLP that can respond specifically to the community. Students will also analyze potential service delivery models based on other examples across the country for integrating law students and pro bono attorneys into MLPs. Students will come away from this project with an understanding of how to build interdisciplinary community partnerships to address poverty-related problems affecting children’s health through an innovative legal services delivery model.

**Final work products for Project 1 are:**

- ❖ A community needs assessment;
- ❖ A written proposal of legal services delivery models that include law students and pro bono lawyers; and
- ❖ A presentation of findings at a meeting of interested stakeholders.

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## ***PROJECT 2: Housing Rights for Returning Citizens***

From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, 30,289 people entered prison, 83,176 people were admitted to community supervision, and 84,919 were released from supervision. An average of 88 people returned to society each day. In Florida, during that same period 31,957 people were released from prisons. Returning citizens face challenges in locating stable housing when they return to their communities because of the legacy of policies such as the “one-strike” rule implemented in the 1980s, when federally subsidized housing providers would evict families associated with any criminal activity occurring on or off of the property.

Many affordable housing providers still embrace policies which prevent people with any criminal history, including arrests regardless of whether a conviction occurred, from being eligible for housing. These types of policies have spread to the private housing market via homeowners associations as well. In recent years, Florida jurisdictions have also started adopting Crime Free Housing Programs to combat criminal activity in apartment complexes.

Students who select this project will meet with members of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, a grassroots membership organization run by previously incarcerated returning citizens and their allies. The group is dedicated to ending disenfranchisement and discrimination against people with convictions and creating a more comprehensive and humane reentry system. In partnership with the group, students will identify housing rights issues faced by returning citizens. Students will research and develop a Know Your Rights presentation and handouts that address what returning citizens need to know about their housing rights. At least 2 members of the student group will conduct the Know Your Rights presentation for community members in Orlando. Students will come away from this project with an understanding of client-centered lawyering and community lawyering.

**Final work products for Project 2 are:**

- ❖ A handout for returning citizens about their housing rights;
- ❖ Development of A Know Your Rights presentation for returning citizens and their allies about housing rights issues; and
- ❖ Delivery of the above presentation for stakeholders in Orlando.

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## ***PROJECT 3***

### ***Transgender Name Change Online Initiative***

Studies indicate there are about 100,000 transgender individuals in Florida. Approximately 60% of those individuals have not updated their identification documents to reflect their name and gender identity. Although many may want to, they may be overwhelmed by this complicated process. There is a correlation between possessing inaccurate IDs and being denied employment, housing, and other life necessities, leading to disproportionately high rates of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and psychological distress within the transgender community.

The process of obtaining a legal name change is expensive, confusing, and can be emotional, particularly for those with limited functional literacy. It includes fingerprinting, a background check, completing a name change petition, filing the petition with the clerk of court, paying a \$400 fee, and attending a hearing before a judge. To address these barriers, Florida Justice Technology Center (FJTC) and Southern Legal Counsel are proposing to build an online forms preparation tool (similar to Turbo Tax) to assist individuals in navigating the process. However, the process varies by judicial circuit, and even by county within each judicial circuit (there are 67 counties in 20 judicial circuits) and this factor is impeding the organizations' efforts to develop the tool.

Students who select this project will work with FJTC and SLC to identify and gather county-specific information about the name change process. Students will contact the relevant clerks of court to verify and obtain the correct forms and information, and then submit this information on a rolling basis so that it can be incorporated onto the website over the course of the semester. Students will also prepare a white paper that (1) describes the issues caused by local variations in the process and (2) advocates for a uniform statewide process so that this online tool can be utilized statewide to address a critical access to justice issue.

To inform their analysis of the issue, students will have the opportunity to observe/work with trans individuals who are filling out the name change petition either at a community clinic/workshop or similar setting. Students will come away from this project with an understanding of ways to leverage technology to expand access to justice, and how to identify and advocate for reform of court procedures that impede access to justice.

**Final work products for Project 3 are:**

- ❖ A dataset of forms and information about county-specific name-change processes in Florida; and
- ❖ A white paper describing issues related to the lack of uniformity of name change processes in Florida and advocating for reform.

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## ***PROJECT 4: Abortion Rights Campaign***

Since the US Supreme Court handed down its 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, the right to abortion has been limited to uphold any restrictions that do not place an undue burden on women's ability to exercise their constitutional right. At the state level, there have been numerous barriers to exercising the right to obtain an abortion that regulate and limit whether, when, and under what circumstances a woman may do so including: requirements that abortions be performed only at hospitals and by physicians, that women seeking abortions undergo a waiting period and receive mandated counseling, and that minors obtain parental consent. These restrictions make it more difficult and expensive for women to obtain abortions and can the procedure inaccessible for many. The current administration and Congress have taken steps to dismantle women's reproductive rights by defunding reproductive health care through Planned Parenthood and the Affordable Care Act. With abortion rights threatened by a Supreme Court dominated by conservatives, there is a credible threat to the constitutional right to abortion that has seemed taken for granted for so long.

To address this growing climate of hostility to women's reproductive rights, this project will provide legal research support for a grassroots feminist group, National Women's Liberation (NWL) that is developing strategies to address these threats. NWL believes that women must have full control over the decision to have children and the social programs that support reproductive rights including free and full access to all forms of birth control, quality affordable childcare, and paid parental leave.

Students will do legal research on: (1) using the US Constitution's 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment Equal Protection Clause to construct an argument to re-frame the right to abortion; and (2) obtaining an amendment to Florida's Constitution, any issues that would relate specifically to guaranteeing the right to abortion, the state constitution amendment process, any issues to be aware of in proposing or securing such an amendment, and what proposed language would be strongest to survive any legal challenges. Students will draft two research memos summarizing their research and explaining these two strategies. Students will also attend meetings with the client group, National Women's Liberation, a grassroots feminist organization that is a collaboration of two of the original women's liberation groups of the 1960s. Students will come away from this project with an understanding of client-centered lawyering and community lawyering.

**Final work products for Project 4 are:**

- ❖ A research memorandum on the viability of using the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment equal protection clause to reframe the basis for abortion rights;
- ❖ A research memorandum on the potential for amending the Florida Constitution to allow consideration of rights related to abortion right; and
- ❖ A presentation of this research to the client group, National Women's Liberation.

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## ***PROJECT 5: Affordable Housing Policy Advocacy***

The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program was created in 1986 as an incentive for private developers and investors to finance the construction of affordable housing for low-income tenants. It is the primary program for funding affordable housing today. In Florida, the LIHTC program is overseen by the Florida Housing Finance Corporation (FHFC) which allocates tax credits to developers pursuant to its Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP). The LIHTC program requires developers to maintain affordability on units financed under the program for 30 or more years. However, in Florida there have been a number of properties that have exited the program early, largely because of the foreclosure crisis that began in 2010.

In order to assist Florida legal service advocates who represent low-income tenants develop a knowledge base about the status of the LIHTC program, students who sign up for this project will obtain and review public records for the LIHTC properties released early from the program since 1992 and identify the leading causes of early release. Students will also meet with the Florida Housing Umbrella Group of legal

service advocates to identify other problems currently being experienced by tenants living in LIHTC properties.

Finally, students will review LIHTC program documents from other states to develop a proposal for best practices to improve the administration of Florida's LIHTC program. This may include developing proposed changes to Florida's QAP and/or the creation of model program documents (such as lease addendums, tenant selection plans, etc.). The students will present their proposed changes to the Florida Housing Umbrella Group at one of their monthly meetings. Students will come away from this project with an understanding of how social justice lawyers form collaborative partnerships to engage in law reform efforts to positively change policies for the benefits of their clients.

**Final work products for Project 5 are:**

- ❖ A report identifying the leading causes of LIHTC funded developers' early exit from the program since 1992;
- ❖ A proposal for improving the administration of Florida's LIHTC program based on best practices from other states; and
- ❖ A presentation of this research to the Florida Housing Umbrella Group of legal service advocates specializing in housing.

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**PROJECT 6:**

***Addressing the Crisis in Access to Civil Justice***

More than three million Floridians live at or below the poverty line, a fact that has implications for the state's constitutional guarantee that "The courts shall be open to every person for redress of any injury." Low-income individuals may not be able to access the court system in civil cases if they cannot afford legal representation. In response to this lack of access, Self-Help Centers have emerged to increase informed access for self-represented parties.

As part of this service-learning project, students will familiarize themselves with the systemic factors that have caused a crisis of lack of access in civil cases. Particular attention will be devoted to 1) understanding the impact of the gap in access to civil justice on the judiciary and on low and modest-income Floridians; 2) researching statewide and national Self-Help Center models to develop a policy based on best practices; 3) interviewing stakeholders to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Self Help Center model; and 4) supporting local *pro se* litigants through the Alachua County Self Help Center.

Students will come away from this project with an understanding of the crisis caused by a lack of access in civil cases and ideas about the best ways to address this situations.

**Final work products for Project 6 are:**

- ❖ Background research on Best Practices for Self-Help centers based on other state and national Self-Help centers and stakeholder interviews;
- ❖ Training and attendance at a minimum of two volunteer sessions at the Alachua County Self-Help Center under the supervision of Center Director, Annemarie Schuller; and
- ❖ A final report based on the background research and personal experiences working directly with *pro se* litigants that summarizes the access to civil justice crisis within the state, identifies best practices in the support of the Alachua County Self-Help Center, and offers specific policy recommendations.

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***PROJECT 7:  
Addressing Local Heirs' Property Issues***

“Heirs’ Property” refers to property owned “in common” by all heirs, regardless of whether they have ever lived on the property, paid taxes, or even seen the property. It is most often caused when a property owner dies intestate and the property passes on to their heirs as tenants in common. Then when one of these heirs dies intestate, their share of the property passes to their heirs and so on. As generations pass, the property becomes more fractionalized. Heirs who want to take on complete ownership or make decisions about a property may eventually find it extremely difficult to do because all heirs must be in agreement. Heirs’ property issues disproportionately affect people with limited access to the legal system and it has been the leading cause of involuntary land loss among African Americans. Although it is often regarded as a rural issue affecting land ownership, it is also an urban homeownership issue.

There have been efforts in some states to assist heirs when possible through legal means, but little is known about what efforts are taking place in Florida or in our local area. This project is intended to be an early stage needs assessment to gauge the extent to which heirs’ property issues are a problem in our local area. Because it is in a very early stage, there is a limit of two-three students for this project. Students who sign up for this project will conduct background research to educate themselves on the heirs’ property problem and learn about legal resources and efforts existing in other states or in other Florida localities. Through this research they will also identify organizations or

individuals to contact as they develop their final work product. They will conduct a local needs assessment by interviewing appropriate local stakeholders and learning the extent of the problem locally. Then they will develop a final report summarizing their findings and making recommendations as to the best legal means to prevent or address local problems caused by heirs' property. At some point they may make a presentation of their findings to an appropriate stakeholder group identified during the research phase. Students who take on this project will learn how to gather information about a legal problem and apply to a local context and how to conduct a local needs assessment.

**Final work products for Project 7 are:**

- ❖ List of regional resources for those seeking to address heirs' property issues;
- ❖ Report summarizing the issue, a local needs assessment, and recommendation of legal means to address the issue; and
- ❖ Potential presentation to a local stakeholder group identified during the research.

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