

By: Joe Surkiewicz March 7, 2016

Wanted: A way to help newly minted lawyers launch solo practices, while finding more lawyers to assist low- and moderate-income clients with urgent civil legal needs.

The solution: The Law Entrepreneurs for Access Program, a new legal incubator program launched by the University of Baltimore School of Law, the University of Maryland Carey School of Law, the Maryland State Bar Association and Civil Justice Inc.

LEAP, which started in January, gives in-depth legal and business training to new lawyers, as well as tangibles like office space. In return, the four lawyers in LEAP's inaugural class will provide low-cost and free legal help—a win-win as the lawyers learn and sharpen new skills, while helping Maryland residents who can't afford a lawyer.

"I'm so enthusiastic about helping new lawyers learn how to make a living while doing good," said Lynette Whitfield, LEAP's program director. "They all have active caseloads now. We're at the point where we meet and discuss them, just like a private law firm."

With funding from the Maryland Bar Foundation and the law schools, Civil Justice (a Baltimore nonprofit law firm that works to increase the delivery of legal services to low- and moderate-income Marylanders), hired Whitfield to oversee the program.

It works like this: The new lawyers are provided office space and supplies, extensive training, mentoring, malpractice insurance, and case management software. In return, the lawyers commit to provide a percentage of their practice to pro bono and low bono work.

"The goal is to bridge the justice gap for people who don't income qualify for civil legal aid, while teaching new attorneys the business end of solo practice," said Whitfield, a solo who graduated from the George Washington University Law School in 2004 and practices in Rockville.

Last month, the four lawyers in the program finished an extensive boot camp—"basically, all the things you didn't learn in law school, including business stuff, fee agreements and retainers," Whitfield said. "We put them in CLEs in different practice areas. Some of them didn't know what kind of law they want to practice, so we hooked them up with training in different areas."

'More versatile lawyer'

Other training included a 101 on family law from a Civil Justice network attorney and training received through programs offered by other nonprofit legal service providers.

Phillip Chalker, who graduated from UM Carey Law in 2014, had quit his job at Social Security to join LEAP.

"This is a great way to become a more versatile lawyer as a solo practitioner," Chalker said. "I knew one area of law coming from government. This is a great learning opportunity for parts of the law I'm not familiar with."

The program launched in January, and Chalker has already notched a success.

"I had my first trial last [month] and I won," he said. "Lynette gave me some last-minute coaching before the hearing, and then a pat on the back when I won. It felt really good."

When Maya Zegarra heard about LEAP, she applied immediately. Born and raised in Peru, the 2015 UB Law graduate plans to establish an immigration law practice.

"Immigration law is extremely complicated, even for lawyers, and not to mention people who don't speak English," she said. "Because I'm an immigrant, I enjoy working with immigrant communities. In addition to Spanish, I speak French and German."

So far, so good, Zegarra said: "I'm really enjoying the program. I get great support and I'm grateful that I can

participate. I hope to give back as much as I receive.”

The four lawyers have committed to a certain number of pro bono and low bono hours over the course of the one-year program, at least 50 percent of their billable hours during the first six months.

“It’s a hefty commitment, but they don’t have to worry about overhead, either,” Whitfield pointed out. “In the second six months, it’s less than 50 percent, which allows them to save for things like office space. Meanwhile, I’m connecting them with anyone who can offer them worthy cases.”

Now that the program is up and running, Whitfield is looking forward to watching the lawyers build their practices.

“I can’t wait for five months from now to see where they’re at,” she said. “Already, they’re making a difference for people who need help.”

MPILP auction

Speaking of doing good, let’s shift the emphasis to law students — specifically, the Maryland Public Interest Law Project at UM Carey Law, which is holding its 27th Annual Goods & Services Auction on March 24.

MPILP makes grants to UM Carey Law students, allowing them to spend their summers interning at places like the Homeless Persons Representation Project, the Public Justice Center, the Maryland Disability Law Center, the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service, and the ACLU of Maryland.

The event is its major fundraiser, with silent and live auctions, an open bar and light supper fare. It runs from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Westminster Hall on the UM Carey Law campus. For tickets and more information, go to <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2016-auction-maryland-public-interest-law-project-tickets-21389742295>.

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