

For the good, pro bono work

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Dicta Contributor

Walking to Suffolk University Law School, on your way out to lunch, or on your way home after classes are complete, you have probably passed them. Some greet you with a happy face or as you stroll by, utter a loud, "Thank you, sir" or "ma'am." Others ask you for change with an outstretched arm that clasps a Dunkin' Donuts Styrofoam cup. They are the homeless.

The homeless represent one end of the spectrum of poverty that pervades our society. In the hustle and bustle of life in the 21st century it may be easy to turn a blind eye to your fellow human beings. We reside in a time where the Internet has replaced interpersonal communication. The wonders of the computer age tend to distance individuals from one another rather than bring them together. So it might be simple to pass by that man or woman asking for a spare nickel or dime.

It is just as easy to miss those who fall below the federal poverty line. More often than not we are unaware of those who fit this description. They are the family of three whose combined yearly income is \$13,880. These families earn \$1,157 a month or only \$267 per week. With the cost of a simple will in the Boston area about \$750 and an average uncontested divorce between \$400 and \$500, one can see that a person with limited income or scarce resources is hard-pressed to retain the services of an attorney to resolve their legal issues.

President Lyndon B. Johnson was the first to speak about an end to poverty.

During his presidency he summoned economists to calculate how much it would take to end poverty in the United States. The number they came up with was two billion dollars. Today two billion dollars represents a mere fraction of our gross national product. In point of fact the United States makes around three trillion dollars a year.

What does all this have to do with you as a law student or attorney? The legal professional stands in a unique position to help these individuals. They have real legal problems ranging from divorce, bankruptcy, social security claims, veterans' benefits, and a variety of other criminal and civil issues. Without the help of legal counsel these individuals would simply be unable to clear up the law-related issues facing them. Outstanding warrants or judgment debts create obstacles to finding employment, and unlawful evictions put people out on the street. This should concern you as a member or soon to be member of the bar. The essence of the law since antiquity has been to provide order for society and justice for its citizens.

What can you do to help? At Suffolk Law there are a variety of programs in which you can get involved. These student run organizations can use the help. One such association is Shelter Legal Services, which runs clinics in two local shelters and a legal clinic in the Cambridge area. You can choose to volunteer on Wednesday nights (6:00 to 9:00pm) at the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans where you might encounter issues relating to housing, veterans' benefits, and social security. The clinic is headed by a student director with

a supervising attorney with whom volunteers consult to determine what can and cannot be done for the particular client. On Monday nights (5:00 to 8:00pm) you might elect to stop by Rosie's Place, a shelter for women. There you will encounter issues relating to family separation, divorce, and child custody. Again a student director organizes the program and a resident attorney advises students on how to proceed on particular problems.

Perhaps you live in the Cambridge area and would like to help out in your community. Cambridge Legal Services Project runs three clinics that you can get involved in. The first is at the First Parish Church on Sunday mornings from 9:00am to noon. The second is held at the Multi-Service Center for the Homeless on Tuesdays starting at nine o'clock in the morning. The third takes place at the Cambridge Public Library that meets monthly on a Thursday night from 6:00 to 9:00pm. The legal issues you will probably face in these clinics are wills, child custody, divorce, and a variety of other problems that require legal assistance.

Law school takes up a large portion of your time, but volunteering a few hours a week can provide you with an insight into how to manage a case, develop effective strategies for your client to defend against a variety of actions, and foster a work effort that rests on detailed analysis and precision. This activity may not be a "resumÉ booster", but the heart needs nourishment as much as your resumÉ does.

Volunteering in any of these places permits you to put a human face to a legal issue. Often in our voluminous reading of

case after case we forget that real people are involved in these actions. It is quite easy to fall into the trap of reviewing legal problems with an overly cold, calculated rational view. To counteract this tendency, try out one or more of these clinics. In your efforts to solve the troubles of these people so much in need of help, you may grow to love the work you do. Hopefully you will continue to come back week after week even after you have passed the bar and accepted a position at a prestigious Boston firm.

You do not have to be a second or third year student to participate in these clinics. First year students are quite welcome - I'm one myself. Many of the clinics offer opportunities to represent your client in administrative hearings where you need not be an attorney. For those of you who are advanced in your study of the law, Supreme Judicial Court 3:03 certification will enable you to enter the courtroom with a supervising attorney to zealously represent your client.

As a professor of mine once said, "the classroom offers only one type of knowledge - that of the intellect. It is the education we attain in the real world that informs our hearts". We are indeed a nation that feeds off the hands of others. You can contribute and engage in an education of the heart through volunteering in these legal services or pro bono opportunities at Suffolk Law or elsewhere. Begin your commitment to helping those who need legal advice the most today, and join us at one of these legal services projects.