A win-win for graduates, clients

Illinois Bar Foundation pairs with Loyola, NIU and SIU to start legal aid fellowship program

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T he Illinois Bar Foundation and three law schools are teaming up to put J.D. recipients into jobs at legal aid clinics.

As the charitable arm of the state bar, the Illinois Bar Foundation is partially funding three fellowship positions at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Northern Illinois University College of Law and Southern Illinois University School of Law.

It’s a way to address two issues important to the legal community, said David Michael Anderson, the foundation’s executive director — improving access to justice for low-income litigants while also providing professional development for young attorneys.

“Having an attorney in a legal aid clinic is a clear way to do that,” Anderson said. “You get them a job right away, you help train them, and you put them to work helping Illinois residents with civil legal issues.”

The clinics, run by university faculty, let students and recent graduates represent clients — many who can’t afford to pay attorney and filing fees — in a range of civil cases.

Jennifer L. Rosato, dean of the NIU College of Law, said her school has filled a need in several communities beyond the DeKalb campus.

NIU has the only public law school in the northern part of the state and it’s the only one outside of Cook County. The school opened its first clinic in Rockford in 2001, and added a juvenile law program there in 2011. NIU’s fellow will be based in Rockford, Rosato said.

It also operates a foreclosure mediation program in Kane County and will partner with a health clinic to assist people with legal matters at Hesed House, a homeless shelter in Aurora.

Rosato praised the fellowship program for being a practical way to address several issues at once.

“It has the trifecta,” she said. “It enhances employment opportunities and marketability, and it’s great at training them with skills. We’ve got to find creative solutions to try and solve this very serious and emergent problem.”

The foundation will pay for half of each fellow’s salary and benefits, while the respective law schools will fund the rest. Each position pays around $50,000 — an amount similar to other entry-level clinical law positions in Illinois, Anderson said.

David N. Yellen, dean of Loyola’s law school, said he’s excited to have his college participate because of the educational value the fellows will gain while serving others in the community.

“It provides the opportunity to offer some additional training to our students who are interested in doing clinical legal work,” Yellen said. “And it increases the amount of access to justice we can provide to people.”

The Loyola fellow will work in the school’s Community Law Clinic, helping people mainly in family law cases and in tenant-landlord disputes.

Anderson said it’s up to each school to advertise and hire the fellows — the foundation’s only stipulation is that they are recent graduates.

“We’ll advertise for the position, and I’m sure we’ll get a lot of interest,” Yellen said. “There’s always a great deal of interest among young lawyers for this kind of opportunity.”

Rosato said her school will prefer applicants who already have experience in hands-on learning environments and have a track record of public service. The fellowship will sharpen those skills and benefit the recent grads wherever they go next, she said.

“The skills they’re going to learn will be great for any area of the law they go into,” she said.

Yellen said that demand for experiential learning has grown in recent years, particularly as competition for a limited number of legal jobs increases.

A chance to work in a clinic right away could even help inspire young lawyers to practice public interest law beyond the end of the one-year fellowship, Yellen said.

“For a good number of students, this is exactly the kind of work they’d like to do,” he said. “I suspect that we will be selecting someone who has a commitment to this type of work.”

The foundation started a fundraising campaign this month so that it can fund more fellowships at more clinics in coming years.

“This is a pilot, and the extent to which it continues and grows will depend on the bar foundation’s funding and the law school’s funding,” Yellen said. “I would love it if every or most years we’ll have a fellow.”

Yellen said the program will be appealing to every clinic in the state.

“I expect all or most of the law schools will be interested in participating,” he said.

The dean’s office at SIU couldn’t be reached for comment.

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