Lawpulse

IBF, law schools team up to fund public-interest jobs for new grads
By Janan Hanna

The Illinois Bar Foundation will share costs with three Illinois law schools of hiring a recent graduate to work in each school’s legal aid clinic.

The Illinois Bar Foundation has launched a fellowship program for new law school graduates, partnering with three law schools to address the growing need for public interest lawyers. In May, the IBF will begin offering $25,000 grants to three students, one each from Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Northern Illinois University College of Law, and Southern Illinois University School of Law. The schools, which will match the grant money, will select a graduating student to spend one year working in the public interest sector after they pass the bar.

The law schools will select students based on their participation in public service endeavors, including in-school clinics, other pro bono work, internships, and externships, the school officials said. The foundation will have no role in selecting the grantees.

Dave Anderson, IBF executive director, said he hopes to increase the number of participating law schools—something that will require increased fundraising, he added.

Building skills, improving access to justice

"We hope that the program will grow in the future to serve even more of the community and build students' ethos of public service, regardless of the professional path they choose," said NIU Dean Jennifer Rosato. The student selected from NIU will work for one year at Zeke Giorgi Legal Clinic in Rockford.

Instilling in new lawyers the importance of public interest work and helping students find employment is driving the IBF's efforts. "It's a terrible economy for new attorneys and there's a vast unmet need for legal aid, and that's part of our core mission," Anderson said. "We want to help further provide education and practical skills for these attorneys that will increase their chances of getting full time employment."
Starting a career in public interest will have long-term benefits for the attorney and the profession. "The younger they are when they do this, the more likely they will continue [in public service] during the course of their lives. So, we hope these attorneys raised in legal aid will remember that fondly and understand the importance of providing pro bono work in the future," Anderson said.

The foundation, funded by lawyer and law firm donations, spends about $250,000 a year in civil legal aid assistance and donates another $75,000 to attorneys who have fallen on hard times, Anderson said.

Rosato believes the fellowship program will be money well spent. It achieves an important "trifecta: to build important practice skills, to help our students become more marketable through this 'bridge' experience, and - just as importantly - improve access to justice by providing services to those who need it most and by building an ethos of public service in the hearts of the students/young alumni who participate in the program."

Northern will soon begin publicizing the program so it can receive applications from interested students and begin the selection process.

**Law schools are 'training institutions'**

At Loyola, the selected student will be working at the law school’s Community Law Center clinic, which provides legal representation to low-income individuals in a variety of practice areas, said Dean David Yellen. "It will allow us to increase the number of students enrolled in our clinics," he said.

"This is good for the students, as we increasingly emphasize experiential learning," Yellen said. "And it is good for the clients who will get legal representation that they would not otherwise. Also, the program will provide the fellows with a great experience in public interest law and teaching." Yellen said the school administration would select a student who has experience working in one of the school’s clinics or in public interest outside the school.

At SIU, too, the selected student will work at one of the school’s clinics.

The IBF’s decision to partner with law schools stems from a belief the schools are experienced at training students for this type of work, Anderson said. "They are training institutions that have practice clinics to teach their students more. Many of the legal aid organizations want two-year fellowships. So we felt that if we could work with the law schools and they would likely select and give preference to folks who had already worked in the clinics, they’ll already have some experience."

"This is a critical time for the legal profession and legal education, with many fundamental changes occurring and challenges that need to be addressed," Rosato said. "Collaborations and partnerships like this one, between lawyers and educators, will help to take on these challenges proactively and powerfully. We can do much more together than we can working separately on pressing issues such as increasing access to justice and reducing student debt."