Health Advocacy Clinic opens in Aurora

Colleen Boraca, director of the new Health Advocacy Center, addresses a crowd at the dedication while Anita Maddali, director of all the NIU law clinics, looks on.

According to the story, a pediatrician noticed he was treating a number of his patients for asthma.

No matter what he did, he could not help the children. So he contacted an attorney friend who researched the children’s home situation. He discovered the children had been exposed to mold in their homes, and the attorney took the legal steps necessary to get the landlord to clean up the mold.

The children’s asthma got better. And legal-medical partnerships were born.

Colleen Boraca, a clinical assistant professor at the Northern Illinois School of Law, related that story to illustrate the spirit in which the NIU Law School recently opened the Health Advocacy Clinic in Aurora, a partnership between the school, Aunt Martha’s Health Center and the Hesed House Community Resource Center.

The clinic officially opened its doors at the Community Resource Center building, 680 S. River St., across the street from the PADS homeless shelter run by Hesed House.
The dedication ceremony took place with officials from the entities involved, as well as the city of Aurora and the legal community, attending.

The clinic is a place the homeless or poor in Aurora can get needs met, from health to legal to counseling. Boraca, who is the director of the clinic, said being with Hesed House is the perfect match.

"The staff at Hesed House are the most selfless people," she said. "They work tirelessly for the people they serve. It is a place of hope."

Neal McMena, associate director at Hesed House, pointed out that Hesed House always had a small pro-bono referral service out of its shelter. But this is a "more official" setting and association with the legal community, he said.

"It's the crowning jewel on a period of building collaboration throughout the community we have been going through," he said.

Aunt Martha's, through its Aurora clinic, has been serving the direct medical needs of the uninsured and underinsured for years now in the city.

"But we are not really able to address all the social determinants that affect that health care," said Audrey Pennington, interim executive vice president at Aunt Martha's.

For the NIU Law School, the Aurora clinic not only gives the school a chance to serve the community, it gives law students a chance for real world experience dealing with clients. A team of three law school students has already begun serving clients out of the clinic setting.

One of those students is Kelly Schmidt, a third-year student and lifelong resident of Aurora, and a one-time volunteer at Hesed House.

"At the clinic, I've had the opportunity to begin the practice of law even before I'm done with law school," she said. "I get experience working with other professionals in other fields."

NIU President Doug Baker said that kind of real world experience is exactly what the law school and the university try to create for their students. NIU operates three other legal clinics, two in Rockford and a Foreclosure Mediation Clinic, in conjunction with the Kane County court system, in Kane County.

"It creates a generation of lawyers who are going to go out and change the world," he said.

There is more information about the clinic available at the law schools website, www.niu.edu/law.