Creating self-help clinics that promote experiential student learning, attorney engagement, and community assistance.

AALL 2020 EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AWARD WINNERS

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-KANSAS CITY SCHOOL OF LAW, LEON E. BLOCH LAW LIBRARY & LEGAL AID OF WESTERN MISSOURI
The Preamble to the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Ethical Principles encourages law librarians to “promote open, equitable, and effective access to legal and related information.” We are asked to “devise, implement, and improve methods for its access, preservation, discovery, and retrieval.” As academic law librarians, we possess the resources, knowledge, and relationships in the legal community that enable us to successfully serve the needs of the public and our law schools. And we have an ethical obligation to our community.

Promoting access to justice by providing on-site experiential learning opportunities for our law students helps the library support the larger academic goals of the law school. The American Bar Association Accreditation of Law Schools Curriculum Standard 303(b) states that a law school should provide substantial opportunities for students to participate in pro bono legal services, including law-related public service opportunities. These standards require law librarians to constantly think outside the box and become innovative in the resources they provide. Law libraries may become the information empowerment zones of the future, and we need to commit to a new approach to serving public patrons and to teaching our students.

Expanding Access to Justice
We took Paul McGlothlin’s Leveraging Academic Law Libraries to Expand Access to Justice as an invitation to develop a self-help clinic (SHC) that encompasses student learning, attorney engagement, and community assistance. He stated, “[A]cademic law libraries, with their inherent combination of legal information experts and sources, can become indispensable to their communities and schools and make significant contributions to access to justice efforts through the creation of self-help clinics.” In academic legal environments, self-help clinics are at the cutting edge of enhancing access to justice, providing invaluable experiential learning to law students, and bolstering the role of law librarians across the country.

There is a clear justice gap in the United States. According to the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), it is “the difference between the civil legal needs of low-income Americans and the resources available to meet those needs.” In 2017, LSC found that 71 percent of households living at or below the federal poverty level experience at least one civil legal problem. Additionally, 86 percent of the time, the problems received no or minimal legal attention. Likewise, the National Center for State Courts has found that at least one party was self-represented in more than 75 percent of cases. As a result of this profound need, law libraries are stepping in to help.
Recently, the Self-Represented Litigation Network (SRLN) published a survey identifying the level of services offered to self-represented litigants (SRLs) in law libraries across the country. Fourteen academic libraries achieved “intermediate” levels of service, while 19 provided “basic” resources. Basic services include a publicly accessible space, research assistance, court forms, public computers, internet access, and access to a fax machine, copier, scanner, or phone. Intermediate services go further, by incorporating legal community partnerships, an on-site self-help center, additional court forms, and e-Filing services.

The Self-Help Clinic & Adaptation to a Virtual Platform

As one of the “intermediate” providers, the Leon E. Bloch Law Library at the University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC) School of Law joined Legal Aid of Western Missouri (LAWMO) to create an on-site SHC. As a physical presence on our main floor, the SHC provides free limited-scope legal representation to hundreds of community members, while also supporting experiential learning for law students. Students interview clients, develop forms, and work hand-in-hand with volunteer attorneys recruited by LAWMO.

We opened the SHC a year prior to the global pandemic that has upended our physical environment and complicated access to the civil justice system. Crisis invites innovation, however, and we quickly transformed into a virtual clinic to continue meeting the needs of our community. Together with LAWMO, UMKC law librarians created an online intake form that can be completed and submitted via a smartphone. Law student volunteers can call applicants to investigate their legal issue, acquire any missing information, and confirm an applicant’s availability for a secured zoom conference call with a volunteer attorney. Then, the attorney and applicant can work on documents together virtually. As of September 16, 2020, the virtual SHC has helped over 181 applicants. Prior to the pandemic shutdown, the SHC served more than 700 people.

The SHC is dedicated to our community and serves a diverse range of applicants who self-identify as: 42 percent African-American, 38 percent Caucasian, 6 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian, and 10 percent other.

Best Practices & Keys to Success

Our project benefited from support of our law school administration: Law School dean Glesner-Fines readily
embraced the value of the SHC and the opportunity for on-site experiential learning, encouraging alumni to volunteer, and supporting the law school’s community-driven mission. Here are some lessons we learned in developing the SHC.

Collaboration
Our partnership with LAWMO is central to our success. Benefits include:
- Malpractice insurance for volunteer attorneys
- Recruitment and coordination of volunteer attorneys
- Training resources
- Form development guidance

OTHER NATURAL PARTNERS TO CONSIDER
- Local courts
- Bar associations
- Public libraries

COMMUNICATE AROUND KEY TOPICS
- Who will be served? Your SHC partner may have different rules than your law school.
- Collaborative decision-making protocols, for when issues arise.
- Resource provision—clarify who provides what, and the willingness to collectively apply for grants.
- Volunteer management—identify who will find and coordinate attorney and law student volunteers.
- Acknowledge and support volunteers.
- Recruit retired attorneys and alumni.
- Schedule for regular meetings.

Technology
- Establish a shared platform for intake materials, policies, and standard forms. We use Box as our secure content management platform.
- Create shared tracking tools for your work, such as Gimlet.

STANDARD FORMS DEVELOPMENT
- Limited-scope representation agreements
- Briefing outlines for commonly encountered issues
- Regularly used forms

People & Space
The SHC began with the dean, two faculty members, one student, and about four volunteer attorneys. A year later, generous commitments of time from volunteer students, volunteer attorneys, and a law librarian with an active Missouri license have strengthened the clinic.

The clinic sits on the second floor of the law library. We provide closed offices and space for the volunteer student to conduct intakes and refer applicants to a small waiting area.

HOURS, FREQUENCY & SCHEDULING
The SHC started with walk-in availability on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The virtual clinic observes those hours too.

When in operation in the library space, we scheduled two volunteer attorneys each day. For our virtual clinic, LAWMO developed an expanded roster of volunteers. We can now assign legal problems to attorneys who specialize in specific areas of law. Law student volunteers serve as the backbone of the clinic, and SHC has a flexible schedule to meet their needs.

Resources
The SHC clinic provides volunteers access to Westlaw. It also supplies “briefing papers” to assist volunteers and students. Briefing papers are a short synopsis of an area of law, and they include a typical presenting problem, a summary of the issue, a summary of law, initial interview questions, and what the SHC can do to help with this issue.

Law Students & Experiential Learning
A number of students volunteer at the SHC as part of their commitment to pro bono service and access to justice. Second- and third-year law students who desire pro bono honors can obtain the required 200 hours at the SHC. Law students can also enroll in the SHC internship for credit.

Others enjoy the opportunity to obtain practical experience and receive supervision from faculty and volunteer attorneys. Law students apply classroom skills to legitimate cases and real-life situations. Learned skills will directly translate into handling an obstacle with ease following graduation.

Moving Ahead
Self-help clinics do not require a lot of space, can operate on little to no funding, and provide great opportunities for law students and retired, or practicing, attorneys and judges. The SHC also allows the law school to contribute to the community. Third-year law student volunteer Emily Butler noted, “Volunteering at the Self-Help Center is a very rewarding experience that allows me to help those in need navigate the complex legal system and help them access justice.”

A great resource to start your own journey may be found at the Self-Represented Litigation Network, with resources specifically for libraries. Learn more at bit.ly/JF21SRLN.