



Feature

Unique Minnesota Nonprofit Organizes Four Law Schools' Public Interest Placements

By Erica Winter

This past February, the American Bar Association changed its requirements for putting the seal of approval on a law school, shifting from encouraging schools to offer students pro bono opportunities to mandating that schools do so.



The new language in the ABA Standards for the Approval of Law Schools, Standard 302 (b) (2), now says that "a law school shall offer substantial opportunities for student participation in pro bono activities."

The upshot? The ABA wants to see law students out there volunteering their legal skills, and it wants law schools to help them get rolling. Four Minnesota law schools are joined in a unique model, with an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to coordinating student public service work.

The Minnesota Justice Foundation (MJF) in Minneapolis coordinates volunteer pro bono, summer clerkship, and public interest academic opportunities for law students from four law schools in Minneapolis-St. Paul: Hamline University School of Law, the University of Minnesota Law School, the University of St. Thomas School of Law, and William Mitchell College of Law.

MJF got its start in 1982 when a group of law students in the region organized to provide legal services to the underserved. Also, the founders sought to provide hands-on legal experience for law students and volunteer opportunities for practicing lawyers. In 1999, three law schools, joined by the newly formed St. Thomas Law in 2001, signed on to have MJF serve as their source for law student *pro bono* and public interest opportunities.

In addition to handling the logistics and coordination of programs for the law schools, the 160 local groups benefiting from volunteer services "appreciate the single coordinator model we provide," says Executive Director Janine Laird. "It works really well," she adds. The MJF staff coordinates student efforts at its main office and has staff attorneys, and student chapters, at each law school campus.

While MJF programs place law students in the more traditional

public interest organizations, such as Western Minnesota Legal Services and the Innocence Project, volunteer opportunities are not limited to direct service providers. Government offices, such as those in Minnesota's State Senate and local Native American Tribes, as well as nonprofit policy groups, such as the Sierra Club and the Farmers Legal Action Group, also find law student volunteers and summer clerks through MJF.

"You can do a lot for the legal services community" with policy work as well as in direct services, says Sara Sommarstrom, one of MJF's staff attorneys and an alumna of its volunteer programs. Sommarstrom oversees volunteer programs in the legislative, criminal, and human rights legal fields and sees great benefits to both the groups and students who volunteer.

"We're not asking everyone to become legal service attorneys," she says. Further, she agrees that public interest programs can attract more students to volunteer in the community with a wider range of offerings.

While MJF's flagship efforts, the Public Service and Summer Clerkship Programs, connect law students with public interest opportunities year round, the Legal Scholarship for Equal Justice Program offers students academic credit for their work.

MJF's Legal Scholarship for Equal Justice Program is a credit course that rotates among the four law schools and is taught by a clinical professor. The 16 students, 4 from each school, do research and writing on systemic topics in the public interest field. The purpose of the course, started in 2001, is "to incorporate public interest directly into the curriculum at the law schools," says Laird.

For the Public Service Program, a group or law firm (seeking a volunteer to aid pro bono work there) will request a volunteer, and that position is posted on the MJF website. The student chapters at each school will promote the opportunities, and some professors will highlight volunteer work that dovetails with their course topics.



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The Public Service Program had about 1,000 law students participating in the 2003-04 academic year, says Laird. During that time, law schools volunteers provided enough hours of service (25,064) to enough clients (13,484) that together they equaled 12.5 full-time lawyers, according to the MJF website.

The Summer Clerkship Program provides law students with a stipend to do public interest work, in close partnership with the MJF student chapters on each campus. Students staying in the Twin Cities receive \$4,000 and those working in greater Minnesota get \$4,500 (a higher amount to cover moving costs).

With 19 law students participating this last summer in MJF-arranged placements, there have been a total of 402 clerks

funded by MJF to do summer clerkships, says Laird, and 72 more funded by student chapters of MJF doing their own fundraising. And the competition for these spots is fierce. With students allowed to apply to more than one position, this past summer saw 1,340 applications from 270 students vying for those 19 spots.

Meanwhile, each participating law school has agreed to increase its financial commitment to MJF, says Laird, although each of the four schools is not contributing an equal share. This year, the local Bar Association's School Initiative Committee is working on a financial formula, including factors such as law school enrollment and number of alumni, to determine a more steady funding stream for MJF's popular—and now ABA-required—programs.

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