

AZ SUMMIT LAW HELPS FILL A GAP IN ACCESS TO LEGAL SERVICES

By Taylor Kingston

A little over a year ago, Pat McGroder's good idea began to take form, and today it is changing lives. McGroder is a partner with Gallagher & Kennedy, an advocate for ending homelessness and former chairman of the advisory board of Arizona Summit Law School – a trifecta that positioned him to recognize a need and a solution.

He identified a need for greater access to legal services at the Human Services Campus. Similarly, he realized the educational benefit for law students working on a broad spectrum of legal issues confronted by people in the community facing challenges associated with homelessness. Today, thanks to his vision and encouragement, the Human Services Campus in downtown Phoenix is regularly providing access to legal counsel and Arizona Summit Law students are gaining experience in dealing with real-life legal issues by helping clients.

The campus is an 11-acre site operating with the mission of using the power of collaboration to create solutions to end homelessness. McGroder, who is a board member of the campus, conceived the idea and ran it by leadership. It was affirmed that there was a definite need to offer additional professional assistance.

“The campus was excited to provide consistent access to legal services,” recalls Pat McGroder. “The idea was fleshed out with campus leadership and Arizona Summit Law professors and staff to set the stage for developing a successful operation that fit within the collaborative model of the campus, while delivering educational value for students.”

The result is two-fold: a bi-weekly legal clinic where law students earn course credit while assisting clients with a broad range of legal issues and challenges; and a Maricopa County Regional Homeless Court externship where students work directly with the Community Legal Services attorney to represent clients to resolve a variety of legal issues.

“Through our clinic, we are able to provide input and direction for clients, and help to remove legal roadblocks,” said Susan Daicoff, law professor with Arizona Summit Law School. “Many times an unknown issue comes up on a credit or background check preventing lease approval or employment. Navigating through it can be daunting for our clients – they feel stuck. Our students are able to help by digging deeper into the issue, and giving direction that helps clients to get unstuck.”

On average, the legal clinic is providing pro bono legal services for approximately 175 clients each trimester. Students commonly

help to address issues related to landlord/tenant rights, divorce, immigration and citizenship issues, expungement of criminal records, child custody and family law related matters, discrimination or harassment issues and civil law related matters.

“Outside of the practical-practice skills, the aspect I appreciated most about the clinic experience was the introduction to the human-side of the law,” said Marshall Fields, III, AZ Summit Law student and clinic participant. “I had a homeless client that was seeking a dissolution of her marriage, after 15 years in an abusive relationship. After finalizing the dissolution, I treated her to coffee on the way back to the shelter, at a well-known coffee shop. She was just as emotional about regaining her maiden name as she was in actually seeing the inside of a coffee shop. The law gave us an opportunity to connect in a humbling way.”

The Maricopa County Regional Homeless Court externship program is providing additional resources to Community Legal Services, which provides attorneys to represent clients who meet case manager-determined eligibility and demonstrate a commitment to their plan. The court addresses misdemeanor victimless offenses and warrants, including parking, traffic, loitering, and trespassing charges and other nonviolent misdemeanors. Up to three students are able to participate in the externship each trimester. Their legal experience varies and can include conducting research, drafting briefs, interviewing potential and actual clients, and drafting memos and letters to opposing counsel, as well as reviewing transcripts. In 2013, the court resolved 275 cases and heard approximately 120 defendants.

“At Community Legal Services we juggle many priorities and the caseload is demanding, but the work we do has such a significant impact on the lives of our clients, it's all worthwhile,” said Nina Targovnik, lawyer with CLS. “Having additional resources through AZ Summit Law's externship program has proven to be beneficial because the quality of work the students deliver greatly helps with caseload, and it's also rewarding to watch the students grow and gain an appreciation for the need that CLS fills in our community.”

AZ Summit Law students are gaining valuable legal experience through these programs, building their skills in client relations and developing a clear understanding of the importance of access to legal services. The legal clinic and externship programs help to fill a void in access to legal services. Thanks to Patrick McGroder and AZ Summit Law's vision, leadership and collaboration, these programs are helping some of the most vulnerable in Arizona.