The (helpful) long arm of the law

The Law School's new Michigan Poverty Law Program (MPLP) will be a pioneer in finding ways to provide legal help for poor people, especially women and children, as their access to legal services is narrowed by shrinking federal support.

That's how Anne Schroth, the Law School's new Clinical Assistant Professor of Law, views the cooperative effort that teams the Law School with Legal Services of Southeastern Michigan and the Michigan Migrant Legal Assistance Project. She will teach MPLP's Poverty Law Clinic and supervise its litigation.

MPLP is funded by a $300,000 grant from the State Bar of Michigan and a $400,000 Community Outreach Program grant from the University of Michigan. It features a new clinic that includes a class in Women and Poverty, plus satellite offices affiliated with Legal Services of Southeastern Michigan and the Migrant Legal Assistance Project.

Clinic enrollees work on actual cases, many of them referred from Legal Services offices across the state and considered to be of statewide or broader significance. The program also provides technical assistance to the 12 Legal Services offices throughout the state. The aid may range from hooking up e-mail systems for outlying offices to developing a "Briefs Bank" so that Legal Services attorneys can draw on model briefs for cases. Pro Bono Students of America, headquartered at the Law School, also is sending interns to MPLP.

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Schroth expects family and public benefits case referrals to predominate on the initial clinic docket, with housing law cases coming in later. She expects a goodly number of cases to involve Supplemental Security Income for disabled children because new rules for determining eligibility for that aid recently have gone into effect. Cases will involve both new recipients and those who are being cut from the rolls, she predicts.

"In addition, the students are going to be handling some individual domestic violence cases to give them experience," she says.

Explains Suelyn Scarnecchia, Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs, "MPLP is part of the University's effort at community outreach." The new program sets "a good example for our students and other law schools by stepping forward to help maintain the availability of quality legal services for the poor in Michigan," she says.

Federal Legal Services Corporation President Martha Bergmark, '73, in a talk at the Law School last February, praised programs like MPLP for helping to fill the gaps in legal help for the poor that are being created by federal restrictions and funding cutbacks. Federally funded Legal Services aid cannot go into cases involving undocumented immigrants, legislative redistricting or class action issues, for example.

"I think that over the years we've seen the steady building up of other resources, through bar association efforts and initiatives like the Poverty Law Program at the University of Michigan Law School," Bergmark said.

Schroth says she was drawn to the Law School by MPLP's emphasis on outreach. "I really like the fact that it's connected so closely to the field and connected with what Legal Services lawyers are doing," she says. "Part of me feels that you can get too far away from real practice." Not here.

"I'm very happy to be working again in poverty law, where there's such a great need for programs like MPLP. Anne and I were very close colleagues as 'student attorneys,' and it's great to be reunited now in these new roles in clinical legal education."

— JULIET M. BRODIE