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## A free help desk for the homeless

Through breakfasts, advice and community service, a DePaul program aids the indigent

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If it weren't for a group of DePaul University College of Law students and alumni who offer free legal assistance to the homeless, a Chicago man, his mother and aunt might not be on the path to finding a permanent home.

Every Saturday, DePaul students and a supervising attorney can be found offering free legal advice through a DePaul program called the Neighborhood Legal Assistance Project. On Saturday mornings, they set up at Grace Place located at 637 S. Dearborn St. in Printers Row, where the First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple hosts a breakfast every Saturday, serving many people who stay at the Pacific Garden Mission on South Canal Street.

At the breakfast, the volunteer students and supervising attorney offer free legal advice to homeless people who may be so destitute they have no easy way of getting an identification card.

During one such occasion, they encountered a man who had once provided for his mother and aunt. The man, who lost his job after being injured in a work accident, ended up living on the streets with his mother and aunt, according to a program volunteer student Nolan Downey.

The program's students and attorney have helped the man and two women get their identification and Social Security cards so they can collect benefits and then helped the women get enrolled in a program to help them find jobs. The trio is now working

with another program to soon obtain long-term housing.

Those are just three of roughly 500 clients the program has helped through the work of a handful of students, supervising attorney Damon R. Ritenhouse and other volunteer attorneys.

The program, which is a part of DePaul's Pro Bono & Community Service Initiative and Center for Public Interest Law, started in 2012 as a way to help homeless people in the law school's neighborhood. By setting up at the Saturday morning breakfasts every other weekend, the students and a supervising volunteer attorney have been assisting breakfast attendees in getting state ID cards — which are essential to accessing public benefits, housing and employment — and help with expunging or sealing minor criminal records.

Ritenhouse, an attorney at foreclosure firm EV Has LLC, has been with the project's supervising attorney since its inception.

*"I think coming down there on a Saturday morning really does give you amazing perspective on what else is going on ... it grounds them a little bit."*

While Ritenhouse said some of the more than 500 clients they've talked with never return or follow up, they've also seen many success stories.

"It's usually kind of a small step ... but even helping someone get that state ID can lead to them getting a job, and then they get out of the shelter and then



Shaye L. Loughlin



Damon R. Ritenhouse

they get into stable housing. We've got a number of people who have come back and kept us updated on their progress, or they've come back and told us they got their criminal records sealed and we were the ones who helped them do the petition," he said.

A 2011 DePaul Law graduate, Ritenhouse recently received the Outstanding Service to the DePaul Community Award from the law school for his involvement in the program.

Ritenhouse said one of the intangible benefits that the volunteer students can take away from their service is a different perspective outside of law school life.

"I said that to a lot of the first-year law students, who, they think that's the worst year of their lives," he said. "I think coming down there on a Saturday morning really does give you amazing perspective on what

else is going on ... it grounds them a little bit."

Starting in January, the program organizers and students decided to double their commitment and set up shop at the breakfast every weekend, which Ritenhouse said has been useful in quickly following up with clients, who can be hard to access.

Shaye L. Loughlin, a program co-founder and the executive director of DePaul's Center for Public Interest Law, said there are nine additional attorney volunteers, most of whom are DePaul law alumni, who also help supervise sessions.

Loughlin said that while there are other resources out there for homeless people, the goal in establishing her program was to reach people where they are, rather than making them navigate the legal assistance community themselves.

Five years ago, she said she was hopeful the project would continue on as long as it has, but both Loughlin and Ritenhouse both said they remained focused on just making sure there were enough student volunteers available to make the next session happen.

"It felt like such a leap to have this signature pro bono project that I think we were all just taking it one month at a time," Loughlin said. "We knew the need was there. We knew that the student dedication and energy was there, but there are so many challenges faced by the legal aid community and the churches with funding challenges and space challenges."

The project came together with the help of several groups. First United Methodist Church hosts the breakfasts. St. Peter's Church helps a homeless assistance organization called Franciscan Outreach and assisted in training program participants in how to help people get state IDs.

Cabrini Green Legal Aid gave

the students and volunteers training in expungement and sealing of minor criminal records. The program has also worked with the St. Vincent de Paul Center in Lincoln Park in getting referrals for clients who need help beyond legal assistance.

“I think when we started we weren’t sure where it would go next, but so many great community partners ... this whole village of people got involved with this project,” Loughlin said. “With that dedication and commitment ... we were going to figure it out and make it happen.”

Looking ahead, Loughlin said she’s optimistic that the project can expand its list of partners by potentially hosting students in DePaul’s social work programs at

the breakfasts, who can help address other issues the homeless population faces.

The program participants have also been considering the prospect of adding another location, potentially near DePaul’s Lincoln Park campus.

Edward O’Neill, a program volunteer who is about to enter his third year at DePaul, said some of the memorable clients they’ve assisted include young people who have been released from prison without resources or support.

“It’s daunting how much an ID can make a difference in just getting your life kick-started, and it’s difficult if you don’t know where to start,” O’Neill said. “People coming out of the crimi-

nal justice system are often just let out into the world and the world can be daunting for those of us who haven’t been incarcerated.”

“That’s really what has meant a lot to me, to really help people get some footing as they get out,” he said.

Downey, also an entering 3L, has volunteered alongside O’Neill at the Saturday sessions since their first year of law school.

Upon moving to Chicago in 2015, Downey, who is from Erie, Pa., said he knew he wanted to do something to help the homeless.

“When I got to Chicago, the issue is so in your face, it’s so apparent, and it seems to me, or at

least it seemed to me at the time, that the people who are from here and who live here are pretty numb to it, and I don’t think it’s malicious or ill-willed in any way, I just think they’re accustomed to seeing people on the street downtown,” he said.

After volunteering his first time for the program during his first semester at DePaul, Downey said he was “hooked.”

While helping people like the man, mother and aunt, Downey said he thinks the project’s purpose has extended beyond offering legal assistance.

“I maintain that NLAP’s greatest achievement is just being a space where people can come and tell their stories to people who care,” he said.