

HAUB LAW

Elisabeth Haub School of Law at Pace University

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HAUB LAW OPENS REGION'S FIRST LEGAL HAND CALL-IN CENTER

Student-led Legal Helpline Closes Gaps
in Community Access to Justice

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Legal Hand Center Manager Diego Gomez '22, Legal Hand Center Attorney Stephanie Costa, Director of the Public Interest Law Center and Adjunct Professor Elyse Diamond, and Haub Law Student Jazmine Merino '24

HAUB LAW OPENS REGION'S FIRST LEGAL HAND CALL-IN CENTER

Student-led Legal Helpline Closes Gaps in Community Access to Justice

In January, Haub Law launched the first virtual Legal Hand Call-in Center in the Hudson Valley, in partnership with Legal Hand, Inc., an innovative community-based service. The new Legal Hand Call-In Center for Westchester County operated by the Elisabeth Haub School of Law at Pace University, provides free legal information, assistance, and referrals to community members via phone, text message, email, and chat. Originally established as store front Centers in 2015 in New York City, the Westchester Center is now the third Legal Hand, Inc. virtual Call-In Center, joining Centers serving Nassau/Suffolk County and Schenectady/Albany.

"IN ANSWERING CALLS AND SPEAKING TO MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY, I GET TO PUT INTO PRACTICE ALL THAT I LEARNED THROUGHOUT MY YEARS IN LAW SCHOOL."

**LEGAL HAND CENTER MANAGER
DIEGO GOMEZ '22**

At the Legal Hand Call-In Center serving Westchester County, trained Volunteers, consisting of Haub Law students and community volunteers, assist virtual 'Visitors' who live in Westchester by providing resources and information on wide-ranging issues in areas including housing, immigration, public benefits, domestic violence and other family issues, elder law, and estate law, to name just a few. The service provided is free to Visitors, there are no financial or immigration eligibility requirements to receive help, and no appointments are necessary. The Legal Hand Call-In Center is an all-virtual resource center for community members, with office space on the third floor of Aloysia Hall at the Law School.

Law student and community Volunteers must complete a significant formal training process before participating. Law students handle shifts during the Center's hours either as Volunteers or through a guided externship for credit, and members of the broader community are asked to commit to serving a minimum of 3 hours per week for 6 months. Currently, the virtual Legal Hand Call-In Center serving Westchester is open to Visitor outreach several hours during the work week, as well as one evening and on Saturday mornings.

The virtual help is also language accessible with a language line available for callers who require interpretation, and the Center's manager, Diego Gomez '22, is also fluent in Spanish and French. In the first two months of Center operation, more than 200 Visitors were assisted, about 20% of whom identified Spanish as their native or preferred language.

The Legal Hand Call-In Center is part of the Law School's broader Access to Justice Project, which incorporates curricular, experiential, research, and policy advocacy components, all designed to increase student, faculty and staff engagement in pro bono and community work, and to support the local community in addressing justice gaps.

"Through our partnership with Legal Hand, the Elisabeth Haub School of Law will serve an important role as

a resource for the community, while providing our students with an invaluable opportunity to understand and address access to justice issues," said Horace E. Anderson, Dean of the Elisabeth Haub School of Law. "The Center's goals are to empower both Volunteers and Visitors to understand and navigate issues and self-help resources, and to help Visitors resolve issues before they turn into legal actions."

"When we launched our Access to Justice initiative, we did so with the long-held belief that ensuring greater access to justice and legal representation for all community members is central to our mission to educate and train new lawyers," said Dean Anderson. "This partnership once again demonstrates our commitment to working to advance racial



ON THE COVER

and social justice within Westchester County and beyond."

Elyse Diamond, Director of the Public Interest Law Center and Access to Justice Project, helped to facilitate the Center launch with Dean Anderson and, in her role as an Adjunct Professor, teaches the guided externship for law students who work with the Center for credit during the academic year.

Professor Diamond noted that, through their Center work and externship, participating law students learn how legal issues affect peoples' day-to-day lives and are often interwoven with other social service needs. She added that law student participants gain experience spotting and dissecting wide-ranging issues and communicating applicable information and resources clearly and with cultural sensitivity.

"I was very hopeful that in opening the Center, we could better identify, understand, and help to fill gaps in access to legal information and resources in our County, but it has been deeply gratifying to see, too, the broad practical skills and perspective our law student participants are gaining by meeting other community members where they are in real time," Professor Diamond said.

"This is an excellent opportunity for students to hear about the issues facing our community members directly and gain important life experience and legal skills that will help them in whatever professional positions they pursue," she said.

Very Valuable Experience

Sabrina Bellantoni, a 3L law student extern who graduated in May 2023, said she found working in the Center a very valuable experience.

"I grew up in Valhalla, a hamlet of Westchester County, and I am glad to give back to the community and also to better understand the many legal situations impacting the lives of people every day," Sabrina said. "Most people have no idea where to start or how to get the help that they need and deserve -- that's why Legal Hand is so important to Westchester County," she said.

"Between helping Visitors in my community, learning about new legal issues, and strengthening my interpersonal and lawyering skills, I am very grateful that I decided to participate in Legal Hand, and I encourage other Haub Law students to do the same."

Jazmine Merino, a second-year law student extern, said that her time at the Center has been a useful and "humbling" experience.

"I have had the opportunity to meet and help community members who are facing a whole variety of legal issues," she said. "This experience has exposed me to the unfortunate justice gaps in our community and it has been gratifying to help narrow those gaps by providing resources and information to meet the needs of our neighbors."

Recent graduate Christine Isaac, who will be starting her career as a prosecutor in the fall, said: "being a Volunteer extern at Legal Hand has exposed me to various legal issues, such as landlord/tenant, immigration, consumer law, and animal rights. Not only is it helping me become a more well-rounded law student, but it is also incredibly rewarding to talk to members of the Westchester County community and assist them with their legal issues."

Raquel Coppola, a 2L law student extern, found the experience of working with real people with real problems satisfying as well as educational.

"While learning about a variety of different legal topics, I have been able to serve the members of our community. After each call we ask our callers how this call has impacted them; hearing callers express their gratitude





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**LEGAL HAND CENTER ATTORNEY
STEPHANIE COSTA**

for our help and telling us we have helped them with their issues demonstrates the true importance of this program," Raquel said.

"As law students," she continued, "we are not given many opportunities to learn while dealing with clients. However, this position allows us students to speak directly with callers who are looking for legal information and resources. By helping our callers, we are also learning about different topics by conducting a great amount of research. If any students are considering volunteering with Legal Hand, I cannot recommend it enough!"

Rigorous Training and Supervision

Legal Hand Center Attorney Stephanie Costa trains and supervises the Volunteers at the Center. She supervises every live interaction between Visitors and law students or community Volunteers, and she guides Volunteers in spotting issues, doing legal research, and responding with appropriate assistance without veering into offering legal advice.

"It's been wonderful to meet members of the Westchester community where they are and provide resources and legal information that is so desperately needed," said Stephanie, who prior to joining Haub Law litigated cases involving tenants' rights and fair housing issues on behalf of individual New Yorkers and tenant associations at Legal Services-NYC.

"It's also been extremely gratifying to see the growth in the law student Volunteers in such a short amount of time. They went from getting a crash course on a wide variety of civil legal issues, to shadowing calls, to developing their own interview and active-listening skills, to taking a call from beginning to end in a manner of months. They've become comfortable with issue spotting, practicing empathy, doing legal

research, and providing information in a clear and concise manner for community members that need it most," she said.

As Center Manager, Diego Gomez assists in the Center's training and administration. He helps Stephanie cover Visitor calls, and is responsible for coordinating outreach, scheduling Volunteer trainings, and handling other administration and reporting.

"In answering calls and speaking to members of the community, I get to put into practice all that I learned throughout my years in law school," said the recent Haub Law graduate. "Speaking to members of the community and being able to help them with their issues while learning how theory and real-life issues merge is invaluable for Volunteers who are soon to be graduating."

Fighting Eviction

Housing is one of the most common issues that Volunteers help Visitors grapple with. One recent Visitor facing eviction was not able to find representation from local legal services organizations. Her landlord decided not to renew her tenancy and is seeking to evict her, her partner, and her four minor children. However, before this, two of her children tested positive for lead poisoning severe enough that one toddler had to be evaluated for learning disabilities.

The landlord knew about lead paint in the apartment for years, she said. Even after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other local authorities got involved, she said, the landlord didn't address the issue until last year, after which he chose to not renew her lease.

A participating law student was able to provide legal information and resources, including a pro se answer to fill out and file with the court, and resources outlining how to litigate her case without a lawyer. The student explained the process and how to fill out the court forms, then let the Visitor know she could contact the Center again if she needed more help navigating the court process.

"Interactions like this one demonstrate that the Center is already proving to be a valuable resource for the Westchester Community," Dean Anderson said. ■