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Mobile Law Office Takes to the Street

by **Lauren Nowenstein**

With the mission of providing students with superior training and practical skills, while at the same time serving those in need in the community, the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) Joseph and Lucille Conklin Mobile Law Office may be the first of its kind in the country to go on the road.

Students, professors, and attorneys doing pro bono work take the 28-foot law office to public places and private homes, helping to resolve legal issues. The mobile law office serves as an extension of the UDM School of Law clinical law program, which includes clinics that focus on immigration, urban law, mediation, and appellate advocacy.

The mobile law office was launched in November of 2003 under the guidance of UDM School of Law Dean Mark Gordon and Professor Michael Bryce, clinical director. It was made possible largely by a donation from its namesake, the late Joseph Conklin, a UDM graduate of the class of 1951. It was also initially funded by memorial gifts from Conklin's friends and family, the Catholic Lawyers Society, and other donors.

The renovated RV contains two separate client-interviewing areas with tables, chairs, filing cabinets, storage facilities, reference materials, office supplies, and computers.

Tiffany Kimble, Development and Special Projects Manager for the law school, says that her father, Patrick Kimble, transformed the RV into the current traveling law office that it is today. Tiffany describes her father, who owns a flooring business, as "handy" and says that it took him a week or so of intensive work on the inside of the RV, and a few weekends of work painting the outside to finish the project.

Most things in the RV, including the clock, are securely attached to prevent them from moving while the vehicle is on the road. "It's like a space shuttle, everything is velcroed down," said David Koelsch, an adjunct professor at the University of Detroit-Mercy Law School who works with the UDM immigration clinic, and who has taken the mobile law office out on many occasions.

Since its maiden voyage in late January of this year, the mobile law office, which is driven by students and professors on board, has mainly visited sites in Detroit and the surrounding suburbs. It primarily employs a community-centered approach by visiting churches, community centers, and other public places, but also makes some home visits.

According to UDM Dean Mark Gordon, by going to clients rather than waiting for clients to come to it, the mobile law office serves a segment of the population who by disability, age, or another reason cannot travel and otherwise would not be served by other legal assistance programs. “We have, in a sense, really stumbled onto a significant need,” Gordon said.

According to Koelsch, on each visit the UDM faculty who take turns staffing the mobile law office try to take along pro bono attorneys and other professors who are experts in specific areas of law.

“In southwest Detroit there is a big Hispanic population, so we know we will get a whole lot of immigration questions from that community...if it’s a community in an older suburb like Warren, on the north side of Detroit, it’s a lot of senior citizen questions. If it is in Royal Oak, which is a big rental community, we get a lot of landlord-tenant questions,” Koelsch said.

Work done by the mobile law office is a mix of directly representing people and case intake. Students supervised by practicing attorneys and professors staffing the office conduct the intake interview and listen to a client’s problems. They then give advice or make a referral to an attorney who might handle the case — usually from a list of UDM alumni who do not charge fees or will bill at a reduced rate. UDM may also take on the case as an urban law or immigration law clinic case if it is compelling and fits the services of the clinic.

Michael Bryce, UDM clinical director, says that the urban law clinic predominately represents senior citizens in consumer and benefits cases, particularly social security cases. Last year, the clinic recovered more than \$100,000 for its clients in social security benefits. In addition, the urban law clinic also handles predatory lending cases and identity theft cases, which have become increasingly common in Michigan. The immigration law clinic focuses mainly on representing clients in asylum cases.

Mobile law office students and attorneys often take a holistic approach to help clients solve their larger problems. For example, Koelsch says that he and some students recently gave a woman who said she was in an abusive relationship the forms to file a personal protection order, referred her to counseling, and helped her set up an appointment with a nonprofit legal services agency.

One of the strengths of the mobile law office is that it lets students apply what they have learned in the classroom to real-life situations and helps them better relate to clients.

“I love what I do — my job — it’s really fun because I get to teach theory to the students and then I get to see them try to put it in practice....And it is kind of a sink-or-swim thing,” Koelsch said. He adds that the mobile law office exposes students to people they may not have met without the program and reminds them of the Jesuit value of service.

“The students may go off and work in a big law firm and have Fortune 500 clients, and this may be one of the few opportunities where they get to see somebody who’s got real issues, somebody who is not able to put food on the table, because they can’t get the social security benefits that they are entitled to, or they are getting deported, or their son is in jail, or whatever it is. These are real issues. They may never have that experience again — and it’s kind of nice to at least expose them to it a little bit — so hopefully, when they’re lawyers, they’ll come back and do some pro bono service here,” Koelsch said.

Both Mark Gordon and Michael Bryce say that they would like to expand the mobile law office program, especially since the feedback they have heard from people served has been positive and they have received 30–40 requests for home visits so far.

Gordon and Bryce have big plans for the future of the mobile law office, but acknowledge that any expansion of the program, including greater outreach to individuals who are homebound, will require more funding.

Bryce says in the future he hopes a generalized clinic can be developed around the mobile law office that would take on the various cases that come up that do not fit into the areas of the existing clinics. This would require the funds to hire someone full-time to supervise it. In addition, Bryce says that he would like to include more pro bono attorneys to better serve the community and take on casework, as the mobile law office currently makes many referrals.

According to Bryce, when visiting community sites, the mobile law office’s biggest limitation is space. Although two interviews can be conducted in the RV, it is usually only used for one interview at a time. A separate space, like a room at the community site, is often used to accommodate a greater number of clients. More mobile law office RVs would help solve that problem.

“So, if anybody’s out there and wants to contribute money, we can have two or three of them,” Bryce said.

The University of Detroit Mercy clinical law programs receive designated operations donations raised by the State Bar of Michigan’s Access to Justice Campaign. Clinic programs, such as the mobile law office, benefit from these funds. Contributions to the Access to Justice Fund are held and distributed by the Michigan State Bar Foundation.

Gordon’s wish list is long — he would also like to hire a full-time faculty member to supervise the program on a regular basis, increase the number of mobile law office visits into the community, hire a regular driver, advertise in the communities that the mobile law office is scheduled to visit, and put in a wheelchair lift to serve disabled clients.

In general, Gordon also says that he hopes the mobile law office program can serve as a model for other schools.

“We have tried to identify any other law school that has a mobile law office, and we have not found one. So, as far as we know, it is the only one of its kind in the country. Next year we are going to celebrate the anniversary of the Urban Law clinic, which was one of the pioneers in that field. It’s nice to think that now, 40 years later, maybe we have another innovation in the field. The way that now there are urban law clinics all over the country, it would be delightful if this turns out to be successful and if it spawns mobile law offices all around the country as well,” Gordon added.

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