Law clinic to help low-income residents of Coachella Valley

UC Irvine School of Law, Inland Counties Legal Services team up for pro bono effort

By Vik Jolly

RIVERSIDE - Low-income residents of the Coachella Valley are set to get legal assistance as a result of a partnership between UC Irvine School of Law and Inland Counties Legal Services in weekend clinics kicking off Saturday.

The initiative's bi-monthly pro bono effort, dubbed Coachella Saturday Justice, will involve first-year law school student volunteers being supervised by ICLS and other volunteer attorneys. The program initially will include eight students under the supervision of volunteer attorneys from Orange County and ICLS helping clients with family law issues, said Anna Davis, the law school's director of public interest programs.

"Getting students inspired toward family law is something that [the] pro bono program is focused on," she said.

Added Ugochi Anaebere-Nicholson, managing attorney with ICLS' Indio office: "Family law is an area of need in our community as well as in the state of California with the highest number of unrepresented litigants in that area of law."

The Inland Empire has a resident-to-attorney ratio of approximately 1,781 to one as compared with 444 to one in Los Angeles County, according to the University of La Verne College of Law website. While Orange County has four ABA-approved law schools, La Verne is the only one in the Inland Empire, Davis pointed out.

Inland Counties Legal Services provides free legal assistance to low income Riverside and San Bernardino County residents.

"The opportunity to expose law students and volunteer attorneys to the legal needs of rural legal aid clients through this joint pro bono initiative will provide us with additional resources to provide legal services to individuals and families in our client community," Anaebere-Nicholson said in a statement.

The Coachella Saturday Justice clinic is the most recent effort by UC Irvine School of Law to assist residents of the Coachella Valley, according to the university news release.

The school's Community and Economic Development Clinic has been involved in ongoing representation of mobile home park residents in the Coachella Valley, helping them with a variety of problems, the release said. Students and faculty travel to these sites to meet with clients, testify at public hearings and appear in court, according to UCI.

According to the U.S. Census, 34.6 percent of residents live below the poverty level, making San Bernardino the poorest city for its population in California, and the second poorest in the nation next to Detroit, officials said. The unemployment rate in Indio, in
the heart of the Coachella Valley, is above 10 percent.

At the Coachella clinics, students will work with family law attorneys interviewing clients, help with custody paperwork, assist with completion of declaration pages and attend to other basic legal client needs, officials said.

Interaction with clients is an important part of the plan and students will get credit in later clinics for their lawyering skills class, a part their curriculum, Davis said. UC Irvine students are engaged in more than 100 pro bono programs administered by Davis in a year and 95 percent of the law students do pro bono work before graduating.

Coachella Valley residents may contact ICLS at 760-342-1591 or 951-774-4416 to conduct an eligibility screening for an appointment. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Additional clinics will be offered on Jan. 24, March 21, May 16, July 18 and Sept. 26 at ICLS’ Indio office from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The office is located at 82632C U.S. Highway 111 in Indio. Local law firms will be invited to help provide pro bono services during the July clinic, the release said.

vik_jolly@dailyjournal.com

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