UC system hosts first conference on public interest law

The recent event in Los Angeles focused on civil rights issues, among other hot-button topics.

Law school students and recent graduates were encouraged to use their careers to tackle a variety of pressing civil rights issues and help those of lesser means during the University of California system’s first public service law conference.

The event at UCLA last weekend featured panels about immigration matters and police accountability, as well as a high-profile list of keynote speakers.

“Now more than ever, we need law students to become lawyers to represent people who otherwise wouldn’t have legal services and to fight to advance the law in areas like immigration, civil rights, housing and the environment,” UC Berkeley School of Law Dean Erwin Chemerinsky said he told attendees during his closing address Sunday.

The conference drew more than 300 attendees. It was hosted by the UC Office of the President, UC’s Continuing Education of the Bar program and the law schools at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine and UCLA.

The gathering was an outgrowth of UC President Janet Napolitano’s Public Service Law Fellowships Program to support law students and graduates pursuing public interest careers.

Tanairi Alcaraz, a third-year student at UC Davis School of Law and a former UC summer fellow, said it was inspiring to gather at the conference with dozens of other future lawyers with similar interests.

“It was nice to see across the UC system there is a dedication to serving those who are most in need,” she said. Alcaraz, who hopes to become a public defender, said she also enjoyed hearing from seasoned professionals in the field.

Olivia Filbrandt, a 2017 UC Davis law graduate, is an environmental law fellow at the California Environmental Law & Policy Center who attended the conference.

She said she found the panel titled “Water and Social Justice” very engaging, but also found panels on police brutality and other topics not directly related to her work beneficial.

“They enabled me to engage more as a community member than a practitioner,” Filbrandt said.

She said she left the conference with a greater understanding of the many different types of public interest work that are available to attorneys.

Kelly Lake, executive director of Continuing Education of the Bar, said that was one of the conference’s main goals. Her organization was in charge of securing the speakers and educational content for the event titled “Civil Rights in the 21st Century.”

There were sessions on voting rights, LGBTQ rights and special education in schools. Peter Neufeld, co-founder of The Innocence Project, was another featured speaker.
“It was a very well-rounded agenda,” Lake said.

Napolitano gave the opening keynote address on Saturday. She said UC Irvine School of Law student Zackory T. Burns was one example of an aspiring lawyer using his legal skills to serve the community around him.

Burns helped start a clinic through the law school that assists transgender people change their names and gender markers.

He said the Transgender Legal Assistance Clinic, which works closely with the LGBT Center Orange County in Santa Ana, has seen an uptick in attendance from members of the public in recent months.

“This is a community that currently feels under attack, and they are attempting to be themselves while running into legal and cultural barriers,” said Burns, one of the clinic’s co-chairs. “The clinic is a way to empower the community to have their full rights under the law.”

The clinic hopes to expand to other parts of the state, including to other UC schools, according to Napolitano.

Meanwhile, Napolitano’s office and Lake said the public service law conference is slated to become an annual gathering.

“You can expect this to become a key calendar event within the public interest sphere,” Lake said.

The UC fellowships program created last year, which led to the recent conference, awards $4.5 million annually to law students and graduates from UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine and UCLA committed to practicing public interest work.

UC Hastings College of the Law is not part of that program and was not a co-host of the recent conference.

When asked why UC Hastings was not a co-host, a Napolitano spokeswoman said the school is funded separately from the UC system, is not governed by the UC Board of Regents and its academic programs are not overseen by the UC Academic Senate.

“As a result, UC Hastings operates independently from the UC system and its law schools at both an institutional and programmatic level,” said spokeswoman Stephanie Beechem.

UC Hastings Dean David L. Faigman allocated $80,000 in additional funds for public service initiatives and summer grants last year, said UC Hastings spokesman Alex Shapiro.