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Newsroom

Community Economic Development Clinic

Local nonprofit and community business organizations are the focus of RWU Law's newest experiential learning opportunity, launched today in Providence.

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Providence, R.I., Sept. 17, 2013 – This fall, law students at Roger Williams University have a new way to give back to the community while also gaining significant practical legal experience – with the added benefit of driving sustainable nonprofit and business development along the way.

RWU Law's new **Community Economic Development Clinic** – which formally launched today in a ceremony at the University's Providence campus featuring **Governor Lincoln D. Chafee**, among other state and local officials – will focus on teaching students to represent clients in business-related transactions, by providing legal services to nonprofit and community-based businesses in Rhode Island. Under full faculty supervision, students will work one-on-one with nonprofit leaders and small business owners to determine and facilitate their legal needs.

"This initiative is a win-win-win scenario that RWU Law is uniquely positioned to offer," said **Dean David A. Logan**. "Our students win because they learn important skills working with a seasoned law teacher; clients win because they get much-needed, high-quality legal representation for free; and Rhode Island wins because stronger small businesses and nonprofits make for more robust communities."



The new clinic's director is **Associate Clinical Professor of Law Gowri J. Krishna**, who has taught in similar clinical programs at Michigan Law and Fordham University School of Law. For the last couple of months, Krishna has been meeting with local entrepreneurs, as well as community and government leaders, to get a sense of how the clinic can best serve its goals.

"We're getting out there and seeing what the communities are, what their needs are, what's happening on the ground, with the idea of supporting local, community-driven initiatives," Krishna explained. In selecting clients, she is prioritizing "organizations that provide a community benefit, that aim to build community wealth or power over the long term; and that incorporate democratic ownership and control."

Organizations partnering with the clinic to date include the Urban Greens Food Co-op, a consumer-owned cooperative working to open a retail grocery store aimed at providing healthy food options for residents in Providence's urban neighborhoods; the Sol Chariots Pedicab Cooperative, which offers bike taxis, tours and deliveries in Providence; and Navigant Credit Union, which will work with the clinic to develop business law workshops for small businesses in Central Falls. Talks with other organizations are under way.

The launch of the CED Clinic at RWU Law adds to an expanding roster of initiatives at Roger Williams University that dedicate faculty and student expertise toward solving community problems, while simultaneously equipping students with real-world, hands-on, collaborative experiences that build the skills required for post-graduation employment.

"From our Community Partnerships Center to our Latino Policy Institute to public-benefit programs like Oyster Gardening, faculty, staff and students from Roger Williams impact the lives of Rhode Islanders across the state, day in and day out," **University President Donald J. Farish** said. "RWU Law is no exception, and the Community Economic Development Clinic offers a remarkable illustration of how we can serve community needs and allow students to apply their knowledge in real-world settings."

For its inaugural semester, the CED Clinic has enrolled four students; in addition to working with Urban Greens, Sol Chariots and Navigant Credit Union, they are assessing community needs that the Clinic might serve in future semesters. Beginning next spring, the Clinic will jump to the full quorum of 10 students, each of whom will contribute 20 to 25 hours of work per week.

Samantha Clarke, a third-year law student from New Bedford, Mass., is a member of the inaugural class.

“Until I enrolled in this clinic, I wasn’t sure how my legal education could be of use to my struggling hometown, where the impact of the recession was palpable and powerful,” Clarke said. “But this has been the most valuable experience for me in law school so far. It gives me the opportunity to serve others in the same way I hope to serve the people of my hometown someday.”

That is exactly the sort of practical takeaway Krishna hopes the clinic’s students will gain.

“The primary goal of the clinic will be to teach the practice of transactional lawyering while providing service to under-served entrepreneurs and organizations,” Krishna explained. Students will interview and counsel clients, grasp legal and ethical issues, determine the best legal entity choice, assist with the creation and filing of organizational documents, agreements, leases and other contracts. The bottom-line question that will govern all clinical activities is, “What do I need to do to become an excellent lawyer?” she said.

But her students definitely see the bigger picture as well.

“I initially was attracted to the clinic because I wanted to gain some practical experience in transactional work,” said **Zoe Zhang**, a third-year law student. “But I very quickly realized that clinic serves a much more important mission in the Rhode Island community. Our work, even in this first semester, could be felt in the community for years to come.”

About Professor Gowri Krishna: Associate Clinical Professor Gowri J. Krishna is the director of RWU Law’s new Community Economic Development Clinic. She was formerly a Visiting Clinical Professor at Michigan Law’s Community and Economic Development Clinic. Her areas of interest include transactional lawyering in support of community organizing and social-change movements; creating community-based institutions primarily in communities comprised of low-wage, immigrant workers; and cross-cultural lawyering. Earlier, Professor Krishna taught in the Community Economic Development Clinic at Fordham University School of Law as a Clinical Teaching Fellow.

After law school, she was awarded an Equal Justice Works Fellowship from 2006-2008 to work in the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center in New York City, where she remained as a staff attorney prior to joining the faculty at Fordham in 2010. At the Urban Justice Center, Professor Krishna provided transactional legal support (e.g., contract drafting and negotiating, corporate, tax, real estate, and regulatory compliance matters) to numerous community-based organizations. Her work also focused on forming worker cooperatives made up of low-wage, immigrant workers. She earned her A.B., magna cum laude, in social thought and analysis and political science from Washington University in St. Louis in 2001, and her J.D. from Fordham University School of Law in 2006, where she was notes and articles editor of the International Law Journal.

Contact the Community Economic Development Clinic: cedc@rwu.edu