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Newsroom: ProJo Highlights Pro Bono Collaborative

Roger Williams University School of Law

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Newsroom

ProJo Highlights Pro Bono Collaborative

The Providence Journal highlights a novel expungement program -- one of many innovative programs offered by RWU Law's Pro Bono Collaborative.

From the **PROVIDENCE JOURNAL**: "[Settling past misdeeds with Pro Bono help](#)" by Bryan Rourke



PAWTUCKET, R.I., September 30, 2011— Forget the past. Better yet, expunge it.

Thursday afternoon, Tim Walker, 43, took a long-sought step toward cleaning his criminal record. Walker, who's homeless and living at the Crossroads Rhode Island shelter in Providence, attended the first expungement clinic for the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless.

"I'm preparing for whatever opportunity comes," Walker said. "I'm ready."

Walker said he's ready for a job and a subsidized apartment. But he has a 2004 criminal offense: driving on a suspended license.

It's minor, Walker said, but employers and housing officials "will look at that and be wary."

So Walker wants to pre-empt the wariness.

Expungement is the answer. And **the Pro Bono Collaborative** is guiding qualified, low-income people through a court process culminating in a judge's approval.



"The need out there is so great and getting greater because of the economy," said **Eliza Vorenberg, the collaborative's director**. "There is plenty of work to go around."

But there aren't plenty of lawyers doing the work, especially not for free, which is all that homeless and jobless people can afford.



"There is a void," said **Suzanne Harrington-Steppen, the collaborative's project coordinator**. "This is really filling a need."

The collaborative, a project of the Roger Williams University School of Law, a dozen law firms and three dozen social-service organizations, began in 2006, offering many legal services. Last year, the collaborative included monthly expungement clinics at McAuley House in Providence. Now, the expungement clinics have expanded, because of what **Vorenberg** called a "vast" need.

And the need is greatest for the most needy, said Jim Ryczek, the coalition's executive director. Jobless and homeless people have a hard enough time. A criminal-offense record, Ryczek said, is "the gift that keeps on giving."

A criminal offense can pose problems for a person looking for housing and employment.

“An old misdemeanor can prevent someone from getting a job,” **Harrington-Steppen** said. “It’s not legal, but that’s what employers do.”

Expungement is available to any first-time offender, provided there are no new offenses and sufficient time has passed: 5 years for a misdemeanor, 10 for a nonviolent felony.

“It’s one bite at the apple,” **Vorenberg** said. “And it has to be a nonviolent crime.”

More than 50 people called to inquire about the clinic, said Constance Vergowven, the coalition’s legal clinics coordinator. Fifteen people signed up. One was Walker.

“There is a bright side to the dark side of homelessness,” Walker said. “You’re at bottom. There’s nowhere to go but up.”

Walker last worked as a mini-mart attendant, until 2007, when the business went bankrupt. Then he was out of a job, a car, a license and a home; and in a recession.

Walker said he has recently completed a 16-week animal-care program and would like to find work in a pet shop or veterinary clinic. But first, he said, he wants to clear his record.

“Then I’ll know that’s not why I didn’t get an opportunity,” Walker said.

The state Public Defender’s Office reports on its website that a job applicant with an expunged crime may say “he or she has never been convicted of a crime.”

People can seek expungement without a lawyer.

“But without a legal education, most people would get completely lost in the process,” **Harrington-Steppen** said. “Anyone can do it, but good luck.”

For the coalition clinic, the collaborative partnered with **the Providence law firm of Nixon Peabody** to provide free consultation and representation. Timothy Baldwin, a lawyer with the firm, and **Jaime Rogers, a third-year law student at RWU**, took Walker’s case.

“I want everyone who helped me to know that their assistance was not in vain,” Walker said. “My success will be my way of saying thanks.”

For full story, click [here](#)

