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Newsroom: A New Voice for Access to Justice

Roger Williams University School of Law

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Newsroom

A New Voice for Access to Justice

Rhode Island Center for Justice, in cooperation with RWU Law, launches new public-interest law center to provide legal assistance, educate new attorneys.



PROVIDENCE, R.I., April 9, 2015 – To help address

the growing volume of unmet legal needs among vulnerable individuals, families and communities in Rhode Island, representatives from the [Rhode Island Center for Justice](#) and the [Roger Williams University School of Law](#) gathered with elected officials, members of the bench and bar, and allied community organizations today to formally launch the Center for Justice, a new nonprofit public interest law center.

The Center for Justice's Board of Directors, led by Chair Miriam Weizenbaum and Vice-Chair Amato DeLuca, joined University President Donald J. Farish, RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky and other speakers in describing the need for increased access to justice in Rhode Island, along with the potential to offer new attorneys hands-on experience serving community members struggling with housing, employment, immigration and other critical issues.

"Few places in the U.S. are in greater need of these services than Rhode Island," Weizenbaum said.

"While Rhode Islanders have suffered some of the most dramatic economic hardships of the past decade, there is a glaring lack of access to civil legal services for those who struggle with the dire consequences of poverty such as homelessness, health impairment exacerbated by environmental factors, and predatory employment and consumer practices. The Center for Justice will be a voice for those who would often otherwise be without qualified legal assistance."

According to Weizenbaum, the Center for Justice reflects Rhode Island's inclusion in the growing national movement of nonprofit legal services and social justice organizations working to fill significant gaps in access to justice. She pointed specifically to the need for legal assistance among the working poor and immigrants who are frequently ineligible for federally funded civil legal aid. Across the country, she noted, similar justice centers and other law school affiliated programs are succeeding in expanding the availability of legal assistance for substantial segments of the population.

Under the leadership of attorneys Weizenbaum and DeLuca of [DeLuca & Weizenbaum, Ltd.](#), the Center took shape over the past 18 months. Created in cooperation with the Roger Williams University School of Law, its mission is to ensure justice for vulnerable individuals, families and communities in Rhode Island through the provision of free legal services and advocacy.

With early support and seed funding from the state's legal community, RWU Law included, the Center for Justice is now operational. Partnering with community-based organizations, the Center for Justice has identified areas of critical unmet legal need where its attorneys can support collective efforts to improve the lives of those affected by poverty and injustice. With a current staff of three full-time attorneys, the Center for Justice has undertaken initial work in the areas of housing, employment and immigration.

"The Rhode Island Center for Justice promises to be a valuable tool in our efforts to meet the legal needs of low-income families in the civil arena," noted Rhode Island Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell. "Public service has always been an essential component of the legal profession; the Center for Justice provides a model that will facilitate the ability to help fellow citizens in the best tradition of public interest law."

An innovative staffing model for the Center, developed with the law school, features a post-graduate fellowship program open exclusively to recent RWU Law alumni. Four full-time staff attorney positions are filled through a competitive application process by which RWU Law alumni from the previous five graduating classes are selected to work at the Center for Justice for a two-year period.

The fellowship expands on the continuum of experiential learning opportunities at RWU Law. With an [explicit guarantee](#) that every qualified law student can participate in hands-on clinical training, the School's [Feinstein Center for Pro Bono and Experiential Education](#) offers experiences that range from work in one of four RWU Law clinics, to dozens of externships and clerkships, to project-based [Pro Bono Collaborative](#) efforts and more. It also makes RWU Law [one of just more than 30 law schools in the country](#) to offer fellowship, residency or incubator programs that enable newly admitted lawyers to build the practical skills required to launch successful law practices.

"The Center for Justice model is an exciting next step in the evolution of RWU Law's overall approach to legal education," Yelnosky said. "It will create opportunities for some of our graduates to have a formal period during which they receive high-quality and intensive training that will help them cross the bridge to practice better equipped to serve their clients. It is also consistent with the School of Law's focus on the obligation of lawyers to serve those who cannot afford legal representation. There is a desperate need for more poverty lawyers in the community, and our graduate fellows at the Center will help meet that need. Our graduates win, and the community wins."

Another critical component of the Center for Justice model is a community partnerships based approach to delivering legal services. According to Weizenbaum, the Center for Justice will build relationships with community-based organizations to develop legal services programming that advances those partners' broader goals for social justice.

Currently, the Center for Justice is assisting low-income households through partnerships with [Fuerza Laboral](#), a workers' rights center in Central Falls; the [George Wiley Center](#), a community organization in Pawtucket; and the [Community Action Partnership of Providence](#). With those community partners, the Center is addressing legal issues related to workers' rights, utility termination protection, and substandard housing conditions, respectively. The Center is also partnering with a network of nonprofit immigration service providers in Rhode Island to address the acute need for legal representation among unaccompanied immigrant children seeking legal status in the U.S.

"The Rhode Island Center for Justice represents a desperately needed source of legal assistance for low-income Rhode Islanders," said Melissa Husband, executive director of the Community Action Partnership of Providence. "As a direct provider of services to the poor and vulnerable in our community, I witness this need on a daily basis and am convinced that the Center for Justice will be a vital partner to CAPP and a valued resource for many."

About the Rhode Island Center for Justice: *The Rhode Island Center for Justice is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit public interest law center created in cooperation with Roger Williams University School of Law. The Center for Justice aims to ensure justice for vulnerable individuals, families and communities in Rhode Island through the provision of free legal services and strategic advocacy in partnership with community based organizations.*