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Roger Williams University School of Law

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# Newsroom

## RI Center for Justice Takes Off

Providence Business News explores how the new Rhode Island Center for Justice -- staffed by RWU Law alumni -- ensures that income is no barrier to justice.

From **PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS**: "[Nonprofit ensures income is no barrier to justice](#)" by Patricia Daddona



**PROVIDENCE, June 6, 2015 --** **Misty Delgado** left corporate employment to become a fellow at the **Center for Justice**, a new, independent nonprofit dedicated to public-interest law and helping people on low incomes get legal representation.

Delgado's clients include a Hispanic man from Providence who lost his job but was denied unemployment benefits. The individual had a 10-year history with the company, repeated promotions and commendations, but an interpersonal problem with a middle manager, said **Robert McCreanor**, the center's executive director.

"He had difficulty in presenting a clear account of what happened," in part because of the language barrier, McCreanor said. But in April, a hearing before three law judges led to reinstatement of his benefits, thanks to Delgado's assistance.

The situation shows that "people don't really have access to justice if they don't have access to qualified legal assistance," said McCreanor.

"That type of case was the reason I came to the center," said **Delgado, a 2011 graduate of the Roger Williams University School of Law**. "If we win, [clients] go home and their lights are on, so it's more of an immediate help to people [than private practice]."

Established in January, **the Center for Justice is housed at RWU in Providence** and seeded with funding and a vision from the law firm of **DeLuca & Weizenbaum Ltd.**, as well as funding from other trial lawyers and individuals. The center provides free legal services to households within 300 percent of federal poverty guidelines, McCreanor said.

There are two fellows working as staff attorneys – Delgado and **Marissa Janton [RWU Law '11]** – plus Keally Cieslik, who organizes key partnerships, along with McCreanor. Two more fellows from RWU Law are expected by year's end, McCreanor said.

Working alongside the long-established Rhode Island Legal Services, the Center for Justice aims – like its city counterpart – to close the gap in unmet need for some of the state's poorest individuals, said Miriam Weizenbaum, a trial lawyer and co-founder of the DeLuca & Weizenbaum law firm.

"The law is a really powerful tool and there are lots of great laws on the books that protect people as consumers, workers, [and] tenants, but those laws are meaningless if there [are] no means to exercise them," she said.

RILS also serves individuals and families with low incomes, but that agency cannot represent people who don't have immigration documents or people living in private, nonsubsidized housing, she said.

Robert Barge, executive director of RILS, which was founded in 1969, says his nonprofit welcomes the Center for Justice to the Rhode Island legal scene.

"The need is so great," Barge said, "[we're] welcoming the Center for Justice to the justice community because we certainly do need help and the clients need help. RILS doesn't have the resources to represent all of those in need. Because it's an upstart project, they're going to be somewhat limited, but as they mature, they're going to make a big difference in the lives of those in need."

McCreanor said the center has three pilot programs for legal services with three different community-based partners: the George Wiley Center in Pawtucket, the Community Action Partnership of Providence and Fuerza Laboral, a workers' rights organization based in Central Falls. The center also works with the law school's Pro Bono Collaborative.

The George Wiley Center on May 12 hosted a four-hour Lifeline Project, a type of law clinic in which the Center for Justice helped provide legal assistance for George Wiley clients who may have medical conditions who are fighting to keep their utilities from being shut off, said Debbie Clark, GWC's operations manager.

Although the Center for Justice began operating in January, it only started providing legal services in March. It has handled cases for more than 50 households to date, McCreanor said.

Of the 20 RWU law graduates who applied for the two fellowships, Delgado and Janton showed they had the requisite legal research, communication and analytical skills, as well as compassion and a "demonstrated commitment" to public-interest law, McCreanor said.

"We do anticipate engaging in legal work beyond these three pilot programs," he added.

"The idea is to be a multiissue, public law center and do public-interest work in partnership with other organizations like RILS, peers and other partners."

The center's 2015 operational budget is \$300,000, and that will increase as staffing increases, supplemented with donations, grants and possibly government support, McCreanor said.