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Law School News

‘Force Multipliers’

RWU Law students gain legal experience helping low-income tenants avoid eviction, while also forging longer-term solutions to Rhode Island’s ongoing housing crisis



RWU Law student Camille Capraro, and staff attorney Jordan Mickman of the Rhode Island Center for Justice, at a meeting on the RI Tenant Stabilization Project. Image Credit: Jim Karpeichik, Roger Williams University

April 6, 2018

Michael M. Bowden

Our homes are the solid ground upon which we build our lives – safe, secure, healthy spaces where we can eat, sleep, and spend time with our families; bases from which we travel to work or school; conducive, reliable environments in which we can thrive and grow.

Yet for many Rhode Islanders, this basic resource remains persistently out of reach. It’s a crisis that students at Roger Williams University School of Law are addressing head-on through the Rhode Island Tenant Stabilization Project, aimed at helping low-income tenants who face eviction and possible homelessness.

Law students get involved through RWU Law’s [Pro Bono Collaborative](#), in partnership with the [Center for Justice](#), [HousingWorks RI](#) and the [Access to Justice Lab at Harvard Law School](#).

“For us, RWU Law students are a force-multiplier,” says Jennifer L. Wood, executive director of the Center for Justice. “Having them involved is a critical factor for us to be able to reach the volume of cases we need in order to draw meaningful conclusions about the best way to help families sustain their tenancies, stabilize their housing, and stabilize their lives.”

As HousingWorks director Brenda Clement explains, “The path to economic opportunity begins at our front door. Nothing else works right if we don’t have that safe place to get up from and go home to every day. By providing legal and housing assistance, the Tenant Stabilization Project aims to help level the playing field and change the outcome for tenants in a positive way.”

It also places RWU Law students at the center of the action.

“Students get some practical application of the things they’re learning in the classroom – and we get those extra boots on the ground that the law students provide,” Wood says. “They interact with our clients, they write, and they do research – basic factual research, getting out on the street to visit a property and see what the conditions are; interviewing tenants about their circumstances. Both of these are critical aspects to us in developing cases, and also critical learning experiences for the students.”

Indeed, second-year law student Stephanie Diorio says her work with the project has been eye-opening and gratifying.

“It’s a tremendously valuable experience,” she said. “We’re in the field working with actual attorneys and clients; researching, writing, drafting pleadings. And along the way, we have a wonderful opportunity here to help people who would otherwise not have legal representation.”

An Eviction Crisis

While many advocacy groups assist tenants in public housing and Section 8 housing, no parallel resources exist for those in the private rental market. The Tenant Stabilization Project is an effort to change that dynamic.

“Our review of the docket at the 6th District Court [in Providence] revealed that more than 400 evictions are filed every month in that court alone,” Wood notes. “With no other attorneys dedicated to this work, hundreds of tenants face eviction proceedings without an attorney.”

As a result, most never get the chance to raise legitimate counterclaims and affirmative defenses based on substandard health and safety conditions – and landlords wind up with revolving-door tenancies.

What’s needed is someone who can dig down and identify these underlying issues. Evicted tenants “want to talk; they want to tell their stories,” says law student Diorio, who has interviewed many of them at the courthouse following eviction hearings. “Even when they’ve had a negative outcome, they still want to tell us about the housing issues they’ve been facing.”

The Tenant Stabilization Project aims to prove that when such matters are effectively brought to the court's attention, positive change can happen.

“That’s the ultimate goal of our project – that tenants in Rhode Island are able to live in affordable, safe, healthy housing,” Wood says. “For us, it makes sense for the tenant to be able to stay in their housing – perhaps through a negotiation with the landlord in the context of an eviction proceeding; and for the landlord to upgrade the housing with some needed repairs to make the unit code-compliant. So the landlord wins, because there’s an upgraded apartment, and a stable tenant who’s paying the rent; and the tenants win, because they’re able to avoid dislocation and all of its negative downstream consequences – from loss of education stability for the children in the family, to potential loss of employment.”

‘Absolutely Inspired’

By working together, RWU Law, the Center for Justice, HousingWorks and Harvard’s Access to Justice Lab “hope to make some pretty powerful policy arguments about how these types of cases should be handled in the future,” Wood said.

Laurie Barron, director of RWU Law’s Feinstein Center for Pro Bono & Experiential Education, says the initiative is also a perfect fit for the school’s social justice focus.

“It’s collaborative. It’s in our community. It’s partnering HousingWorks, the Center for Justice, and the Pro Bono Collaborative with our law students. And we also have Harvard’s Access to Justice Lab on our team, dedicating its wisdom, expertise and resources to helping low-income tenants in our community,” Barron explains. “It’s a way of leveraging resources that we just don’t have on our own.”

Eliza Vorenberg, RWU Law’s Director of Pro Bono & Community Partnerships, explains, “This is, at its core, an access-to-justice project, through which many, many low-income people will get representation in eviction cases, and many more will get access to self-help materials. And my guess is that, when the CFJ begins doing these cases on a high-volume basis, we’ll have yet another dimension of work for our law students, which will be supporting the work of the attorneys as they conduct this high-volume eviction defense.”

Part of the project’s synergy comes from the fact that the Pro Bono Collaborative, the Center for Justice and Housing Works are all headquartered at RWU Law’s experiential campus in downtown Providence. “Co-locating us in the same building, in the same city, was a stroke of genius by Roger Williams University,” Clement says, noting that participants from each organization regularly drop by one another’s office for impromptu brainstorming sessions. “It’s an absolutely inspired situation.”

Wood adds that “a small nonprofit center like ours really benefits at every level from having participation from law students. We also have a commitment and a partnership with the law school to employ RWU Law graduates, who come to us for two-year fellowships so that their experiential learning and practical training continues beyond graduation from law school.”

Diorio says the entire project has added a new depth and dimension to her law school experience.

“I’m able to take what I’ve learned in class, and put it to work in a reasonably useful fashion,” she says. “Then I can take that experience back to the classroom and share it with my peers and professors. And because these pro bono programs allow law students, under the supervision of attorneys, to represent clients who might otherwise go unrepresented, we can have a huge impact. It’s a really important piece of what we do here at the law school, and I feel very fortunate to be able to participate in these programs.”

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The Rhode Island Tenant Stabilization Project program is made possible through a gift from Hassenfeld Family Initiatives LLC, which established the [Hassenfeld Projects](#) – an intensive, three-year initiative to expand and enhance innovative work in experiential education. The grant builds on RWU’s growing cadre of experiential programs that prepare students to meet the demands of today’s employers while building skill sets in areas such as economic development, sustainability and social justice.