

News

Helping children in the juvenile justice system get their lives on track

By Ashanti M. Alvarez



Credit: Nick Romanenko

Law school faculty Sandra Simkins and J.C. Lore are co-directors of the new Children's Justice Clinic, which will launch in January 2007. Simkins and Lore worked together at the public defender office in Philadelphia. Neither knew the other was applying to direct the new clinic at the School of Law-Camden, but their qualifications led to both being hired for the job. They will direct about 16 law students, who will take a "holistic" approach to representing children, focusing on their overall well-being.

The first clinic at the School of Law-Camden to focus on children will introduce a holistic approach to lawyering that places client well-being before retribution. Its target clients are among the most vulnerable in the criminal justice system: children.

The Children's Justice Clinic will launch in January. The clinic got off the ground with a \$75,000 grant from the Academic Excellence Fund at Rutgers. Approximately 16 third-year law students will receive credits for participating in the clinic, where they will have the rare opportunity to represent children in state Superior Court, Camden County.

"This is the first time the students will actually be able to try a criminal case from beginning to end," said Sandra Simkins, the clinic co-director and a clinical associate professor of law at Rutgers-Camden. "And this is the first juvenile delinquency clinic in the region."

The School of Law in Camden already has several lawyering programs, including a clinic providing general civil legal services and one in which law students represent parties in domestic violence cases in Camden County. The Children's Justice Clinic will be the first clinic at the law school that gives students the opportunity to focus on children as clients. All of the clinical programs at the law school provide students the opportunity to represent clients in court.

The clinic hopes to be an asset to the area; public defender offices in urban areas are notoriously understaffed and overworked.

Children in the juvenile justice system are increasingly treated the same as adults. "We have all this compassion for the 5-, 6-, or 7-year-old who is abused and abandoned, but when we see that kid later on in the criminal justice system, we want to be tough on crime," Simkins said.

Simkins supervised J.C. Lore for several years in Philadelphia, and their paths have crossed once again. Lore, a visiting clinical assistant law professor, is co-director of the clinic. They came together serendipitously; neither knew

the other was applying to work at the clinic.

“Initially we’re going to share responsibilities. Sandra has experience with fundraising, grant writing, and leadership,” Lore said. “I’ve had several years teaching in clinical programs. As the clinic develops and grows we may divide things to become more efficient.” Lore has worked as a public defender in Cook County, Ill., and was acting director of the Villanova University School of Law Farmworker Legal Aid Clinic.

After graduating from the Camden law school in 1991, Simkins spent 15 years working for the Defender Association of Philadelphia, the city’s public defender’s office. There, she supervised public defenders and developed an understanding of children’s issues and how their early experiences color their futures. An overwhelming majority of children who enter the criminal justice system have suffered some form of physical, mental, or sexual abuse. In response to the trauma, they often self-medicate with drugs.

“The positive thing is once you become aware of that, if you understand where these children come from, you are better able to design services to heal that trauma,” Simkins said. “You can treat drug and alcohol abuse, but treatment won’t deal with the trauma.”

Holistic lawyering prompts attorneys to look at their clients as whole human beings and consider their mental, emotional, financial, and physical standing. “If I have a homeless client, I don’t just want to beat the case. I want to deal with the housing issue also,” Simkins said. The clinic will hire a social worker to help students identify problems and connect clients with services and programs. Students from the School of Social Work will participate in the clinic as well.

Victoria Chase, a clinical associate professor of law and chair of clinical programs, said that holistic lawyering, and the work of the Children’s Justice Clinic, requires partnerships with community stakeholders.

To that end, the clinic will likely establish relationships with the School of Social Work, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, the School of Criminal Justice, the Center for Children and Childhood Studies, and other units at Rutgers and possibly outside agencies. The existing clinical programs and the Domestic Violence Project provide models for university and community collaboration, she said.

Funding from the Academic Excellence Fund was critical in forming the clinic, Chase said. “It was the first money we had to do anything. We simply would not have been able to do this had we not gotten the AEF grant,” she said. “The students take tremendous satisfaction in the opportunity because it really is about providing a person with services they need.”