

Graduate School of Social Work Offers Innovative Prisoner Re-entry Internship Program

Touro College's Graduate School of Social Work has partnered with non-profit public defender organizations Appellate Advocates and the Center for Appellate Litigation on an innovative internship program that is giving students the chance to work on prisoner re-entry issues while also playing a significant role in developing the program.

Claudia Trupp, senior appellate counsel for the Center for Appellate Litigation, reached out to Roberta Shiffman, director of field education and advisement for the Graduate School of Social Work, after she realized the Center needed to help prisoners not only with their appeals, but with their re-entry into society, and the two women conceived of the internship program together.

"Claudia's organization saw a need," said Ms. Shiffman. "They had their clients getting out of prison and sometimes turning to them for help. But their clients were turning to attorneys whose expertise is in appellate briefs; they didn't have expertise in getting services for clients. As a new social work school, it's a nice link between the social work component and the legal arena."

Ms. Trupp first applied for grants to pay a full-time social worker for two years but after she was unable to secure funding, she turned to Touro to establish the internship program, which she says was the first of its kind at a New York appellate defender organization. "We were the first ones to do this through a social work internship program that I'm aware of," said Ms. Trupp.

The internship program at the Center for Appellate Litigation ran from September 2007 through last summer when the Center hired one of the Touro interns, now an MSW graduate, on a part-time basis. The program at Appellate Advocates began in January 2009 and is still ongoing. The Center for Appellate Litigation handles appeals from courts in Manhattan and the Bronx while Appellate Advocates deals with appeals emanating from courts in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.

Ms. Trupp said the Touro internship



Touro social work interns Felicia Diamond-Fried (L) and Miriam Ilyayev working at Appellate Advocates

program also marked the first time the Center for Appellate Litigation, which handles about 330 criminal appeals per year, had tackled issues involving prisoner re-entry into society. "We had never done a program like this before. We had law school interns dealing with issues of confinement like prisoners not receiving medical attention or complaints about how they were being treated, but this was the first time we worked with social work interns on prisoner re-entry issues."

Sarah Berger, appellate counsel for Appellate Advocates, said her office also determined that a prisoner re-entry internship program would be a "good fit" for the organization. "There's a growing realization within the criminal defense and social work communities that we need to provide greater support and transitional assistance to ex-offenders who are leaving prison in order to ensure that they don't return to prison; in order to help them develop the skills they need to make that difficult transition," she said.

The former inmates aided by the two public defender organizations have served sentences ranging from one to 15 years for crimes including drug sales or possession, robbery and burglary. Ms. Shiffman said public defender organizations are extremely well placed to help former prisoners with re-entry issues. "There are

clients who are hesitant to go to re-entry agencies or are suspicious of help. But they have a relationship with their lawyers. This is the person who went to bat for them and appealed their case."

Since the program began, interns at both organizations have aided about 80 former prisoners upon their release with such issues as transitional housing, access to healthcare, employment and supportive counseling. The interns accompany freed inmates to interviews for housing, Medicaid and other benefits, and help them fill out forms and applications. They also try to serve as go-betweens when former prisoners encounter hostility from social service providers who may not want to work with ex-offenders. In addition, the interns provide supportive counseling sessions during which they talk to the former inmates about the difficulties they're facing in adjusting to life outside of prison.

Elizabeth Rosario, a second year student in the Graduate School of Social Work who interned at the Center for Appellate Litigation last year, said she never thought she would wind up working with a prisoner population, especially since her previous full-time job was counseling battered women. "I was a little nervous about it because I had been work-

ing with women who were victimized by men,” she said. “But it’s been a wonderful experience. It has really made me open my mind to biases that I’ve had. People who commit crimes also need help regardless of what they’ve done in the past.”

First-year student Miriam Ilyayev said she felt it was Divine Providence that led her to the internship this year at Appellate Advocates, where she has the opportunity to work with ex-offenders, many of whom have had substance abuse problems. “I had experience with a certain person who

Since the program at the Center for Appellate Litigation was new, students had the rare opportunity to help create it. At Appellate Advocates, the interns assist in the development of the young program and contribute to improving it. “It is particularly exciting because we have students who are really making an impact from the beginning,” said Ms. Shiffman, who previously worked as a field instructor in New York City public schools and a field adviser for the Columbia University and NYU schools of social work. “They

need for re-entry services is also becoming a growing area of interest in the social work community and society in general, according to Ms. Shiffman.

“If we don’t help people getting out of prisons recreate a life, the chances are that they’ll end up back in prison again,” she said. “It’s estimated that it costs nearly \$40,000 a year to keep somebody incarcerated in New York so if we can prevent that from being a recurring cycle, it’s good for everyone—the offender, the state, the budget, and for society as a whole. I think the needs are just growing in terms of how we’re going to address this population when they come out of prison and how we’re going to keep them out of prison. We are at the cutting edge of something that needs to be developed further.”

The social work interns visit clients in prison to get a sense of the environment they are leaving and to establish a personal relationship with them. “The hope is that the client will feel more incentive to follow up once they’re released if they have a personal connection with a social worker before they leave prison,” said Ms. Trupp.

Despite some initial resistance, the Touro social work interns are learning to appreciate working with former prisoners. “It’s not always the students’ first choice but then they find out how interesting and rewarding it can be,” said Ms. Shiffman, who has her own appreciation of working with a prison population—an internship at Riker’s Island for a course in sociology and criminology during her undergraduate studies is what attracted her to the field of social work. “Even if the interns don’t choose this type of social work, the program helps them learn basic social work skills like interviewing, engaging with clients, developing resources and assessing problems, which they can take somewhere else.”

Added Ms. Berger, who supervises the internship program at Appellate Advocates, “One of the exciting things about the program is seeing the students come in with a certain amount of trepidation and then uniformly down the line seeing all of them get so much out of it. The students realize the ex-offenders are people who need a lot of help and are often very eager and grateful for that help. I think the students have learned a lot from the experience and the program is working for us as well. We’re very happy with it.” ■



(L-R) Social work intern Cheryl Joyles, field supervisor Bob Ackerman and intern Elizabeth Rosario at the Center for Appellate Litigation

is very close to me who was addicted to alcohol and I was just very interested in working with that population.”

Mrs. Ilyayev, an Orthodox Jew who immigrated to the United States from Uzbekistan as a child, had expected to be working with Holocaust survivors but needed to own a car for that internship and had sold hers just before beginning the MSW program at Touro this past fall. “It never occurred to me that I would be working in such a place, but I’m just so grateful to G-d that I’m there because it’s an excellent opportunity for me to be able to learn so many techniques and skills to become a good social worker. My view of this ex-offender population has totally changed. We as a society have to be helping out this population because people may have done wrong but they can change. If we have programs to lead them to the right path, we’ll have more productive citizens.”

are going into their careers knowing they were involved in starting up, developing or improving these internship programs.”

The re-entry internships underscore a growing realization within the criminal defense community that if attorneys win their clients’ appeals but don’t help them re-integrate into society, their clients are more likely to wind up back in jail. “Rehabilitation has traditionally not been part of non-profit appellate defense work,” said Ms. Trupp. “I think there’s been more of a realization of the need for this as the criminal justice community has been focusing on these re-entry issues.”

With freed inmates isolated from society and their families after many years in prison and given only the clothes they came to prison with and bus fare to return to the city from which they came, the