



Chris Mukon '13 on Law School's Economic Justice Clinic and NYLAG's New Mobile Legal Help Center

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A NYLAG law student talks about his experiences in two wonderful programs

In January 2012, the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) launched a Mobile Legal Help Center (MLHC) to bring legal services to neighborhoods throughout New York City that need them most. NYLAG has taken this innovative approach to legal service delivery in partnership with the Unified Court System's Access to Justice Program and with staffing assistance from students in the Law School's [Economic Justice Clinic](#).

Law School Communications Director Lori Herz talked to Chris Mukon '13 about his experience with the Economic Justice Clinic and his role in this new community outreach initiative.

LH: Why did you decide to participate in the Law School's Economic Justice Clinic and what has the experience been like for you thus far?

CM: I got involved with the Economic Justice Clinic mainly as an opportunity to hone my client interaction skills. I particularly liked the idea of working at the Legal Help Desk run by NYLAG's Project FAIR, Inc. (PFAIR), which is the only agency specializing in fair hearings and the only coalition bringing together the private bar, public interest law firms and social service agencies to better serve fair hearing appellants. At the Help Desk, I get to be the front line in dealing with real clients with real cases. Dealing with under-served members of the community is an incredibly important service and an important social issue of the day. Public Benefits policy is intimately intertwined with all the clients we serve. It seems like every case I work on is dripping with really difficult policy, social and moral questions.

LH: Can you describe a typical day at NYLAG's PFAIR, manning its Legal Help Desk in Brooklyn?

CM: PFAIR's Legal Help Desk is located at 14 Boerum Place in Brooklyn, where Fair Hearings are held for people on public benefits. Essentially, when somebody has an issue with the agency over their Welfare, Food Stamps or Medicaid, this is where they go to have their Due Process claims heard. We set up in the corner of the waiting area. There are usually two advocates — law students, paralegals or attorneys — at the Help Desk who do client intake and provide information, advice and referrals to city and community programs. I'd say that one of the most important things we do is listen to people's stories. A number of

people come by with issues we can't help them with. Maybe they've done everything they can already or there's simply no legal recourse. At this point, they just want someone to listen to their story. It's tough when there's nothing you can do, but I do feel like I'm doing at least some small good by putting these people's minds at ease a little bit.

LH: The Mobile Legal Help Center is an exciting new venture. What has it been like for you to be part of this community outreach from its start?

CM: It's really great being one of the people helping to get the MLHC off the ground. While operating a lot like PFAIR's Help Desk, the van gives NYLAG a more visible street presence, offers more — and more private — client meeting areas and is well equipped with technology like video conferencing. What I love about it as an advocate is the variety. On any given day in the van, clients seek our help on a range of issues like consumer debt, criminal defense, family court and personal injury. It's a very exciting place to work.

LH: How has your work with the EJC and the MLHC enhanced your legal education at St. John's?

CM: The most important thing my work with the clinic and the MLHC has taught me is that if you know your client and his/her needs and objectives, there are often multiple ways to achieve a fair result. In the realm of public benefits, you advocate for people from all sorts of backgrounds and circumstances. Some clients make you feel like an invincible underdog, while others really test your resolve. One of the common threads weaving through is the stakes. Clients on public benefits don't have much. When the city threatens to sanction their food stamps or housing, they are literally one hearing away from living on the street or not being able to feed their family. Those stakes can be very emotional and dramatic for our clients. Knowing this helps me work through any issues we have as a team and focus on the ultimate goal. Beyond this, I've learned to negotiate with broken bureaucracies, how to stand up for someone in front of a judge and how, more often than not, persistence will get you where you want to go. Dealing with the state agencies can be very difficult. Learning the right (and wrong) ways of engaging the system when it breaks down have really given me a leg up on my advocacy skills. If you can't be an effective advocate, you can't be a good lawyer.

LH: Have you gained any mentors through your Economic Justice Clinic participation?

CM: Adjunct Professor Christopher J. Portelli, who heads the EJC and co-directs NYLAG's PFAIR, has been a great mentor to me at the clinic and on site at the Legal Help Desk and in the MLHC. Not only is he a great person to work for, he's great to work with. He's incredibly knowledgeable and genuinely compassionate about the clinic's goals and the mission. He's really opened my eyes to the state of the public benefits system, both from the internal realm of advocacy and from the greater scope of public policy and politics. Professor Portelli is constantly engaging and encouraging us to be better advocates for the under-served communities that we try to help. I think the most important reason he's so effective at his job is that he really believes in the work he is doing. He really believes that he can change the world, and so he does. That sort of passion and belief is contagious and he's been a great example to

me of how to open the dialogue when dealing with tough issues like poverty and public welfare programs.

LH: Is the connection between your clinic work and St. John's Vincentian mission to help the underserved and underrepresented in our community a significant connection for you?

CM: I think the public service aspects are really important. Particularly in areas relating so closely to poverty, society as a whole needs people to go out of their way to follow their conscience and do what's right to better the communities we live in. To that end, the Vincentian mission is commendable and reflects directly on the work we do in this clinic. If people don't act out of principle and righteousness, then certain problems will never be solved.

LH: Chris, thank you for sharing your story with us.

For more information about the Economic Justice Clinic and other partner and in-house clinics at St. John's School of Law, please [visit our website](#) .