

NEWS RELEASE
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Unique Child Welfare Clinic at UH Law School teaches students using a multi-disciplinary approach to solving social issues for Hawai'i Children

Honolulu - Students from several University of Hawai'i disciplines – including Law, Nursing, Education and Social Work – are making an impact with their work with Hawai'i community organizations serving the Kalihi area. Through the William S. Richardson School of Law's Child Welfare Clinic, students become part of a cooperative, multi-disciplinary approach to solving problems to improve life for Hawai'i children.

Over this past year student teams successfully undertook several projects, including: assessing the impact of the Farrington High School Teen Center anger management program; developing a universal intake form for families served by half a dozen community assistance organizations; and expanding awareness of the need for foster families.

"This class was one of the things I hoped for in coming to law school," said Richardson law student Ashley Labasan, who worked with the Kokua Kalihi Valley community health center team to assist in creating a one-stop shop for health, parenting, and literacy services at Linapuni Elementary School, as well as a universal intake form to streamline access for families in need.

"I came here not just to learn the law but to learn to be an advocate," said Labasan. "This has validated a lot of reasons I came to law school."

The clinic, established in 2007 as part of the Law School curriculum, is one of the key components in moving student learning from the campus ivory tower to the real world of community needs. It also offers students a dose of reality in how to work effectively across professional disciplines once they're out of school and practicing in the community.

"There are so many factors that go into child welfare we can't separate out the disciplines," said Labasan. "This class is about agencies working together and being able to communicate with each other so everyone knows what's going on."

Law School Dean Avi Soifer has made the clinic one of the Law School's high priority programs. Dean Soifer explained, "The multidisciplinary faculty members have been an inspiration as they model working together well across disciplines and the students learn invaluable lessons about the strengths and weaknesses of their own disciplines and of those being pursued by their fellow students from the other professional schools."

Soifer added, "The class is also exemplary in bringing some of UH's social capital to bear in useful ways out in the community."

Hawai'i Supreme Court Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald has taken a personal interest in the clinic, seeing the collaboration between UH departments and community partners as one of the great strengths among the many programs developed by the Richardson School of Law.

"The Child Welfare Clinic demonstrates the power of a multidisciplinary approach to making a difference in the lives of young people in our community," he said after sitting in on recent presentations by the student teams.

For Cara Rand, a Master of Social Work degree candidate who worked with Labasan in the projects at KKV, the integrated program "opened up new doors I don't think would be available just sitting in a classroom....It was really powerful."

Students have also made huge strides for the community organizations with which they've been involved. Last year, for instance, Social Work graduate student Michela Mol applied for a \$5,000 grant from the Hawai'i Community Foundation to support a Gay Straight Alliance as part of Farrington's Teen Center. The grant was awarded, enabling the Teen Center to develop the program this past year and then to win national recognition. The Farrington GSA's student-led outreach event, "Going Loud," took top honors, and a \$1,500 grand prize in the first annual "'Out In the Silence' Award for Youth Activism." The award was sponsored by award-winning documentary filmmakers Dean Hamer and Joe Wilson in partnership with GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network. Hamer and Wilson's PBS documentary 'Out in the Silence' told the story of the brutal bullying of a gay teen and his family's call for accountability.

Teen Center director Alison Colby said applying for grants to help fund programs was a new and eye-opening experience. And she praised Mol for pushing it forward. “We wouldn’t have applied otherwise,” she said, adding that it helped the high school tremendously.

“The graduate students are able to do things we wouldn’t have time to do,” said Colby. “I wouldn’t have been able to spend all those hours researching the grant and writing it up...Just in the last couple of years alone, it’s been really great for us. The GSA has been revitalized and we were able to put on the event around ‘Out in the Silence.’ Part of our struggle in running these programs is there is no funding. Whenever we start up a new program it comes out of pocket or whatever donations we can get. So this really helped us a lot.”

As the students design, implement, and then evaluate their projects, they have also come to understand some of the challenges faced in trying to help increase the level of community services. During this past semester, students working with the Partners in Development Foundation hoped to work with members of the faith community to build a stronger core of resource families to assist foster children. One of the complexities involved discovering that many churches were already committed to other major projects.

“It sounds so simple,” said one of the students, “but it was an arc of learning.”

Nonetheless, the student group succeeded in having one Catholic Church include information about the need for resource families on its website and to get a public service radio announcement translated into many different languages.

Faculty member Liam Skilling, who helped design the course as a Law School student, notes that such challenges are all part of the learning curve toward understanding how to build partnerships that make a difference.

“One of the most important things we’re teaching is how to collaborate,” said Skilling. “Every year we’ve had great outcomes as students learn about the foster care system and the legal needs of children in foster care. For our students we invite them to go beyond becoming part of the system to begin changing the system for the better.”

That goal was realized by Law School graduate Amanda Jenssen, who now works with the family law practice of Hartley & McGehee. Her involvement in the Child Welfare Clinic two years ago made an indelible impression.

“It was one of the best things I did in Law School,” said Jenssen, who worked with the Farrington Teen Center’s peer mediation program. “We were raising awareness among the high school students that this was a cool thing to do. And they learned life skills that would keep them out of the juvenile justice system.”

Over the past few years the students have worked with a number of other community agencies including the Hawai’i Foster Youth Coalition, the Farrington High School Alternative Learning Center’s Culinary program, the Suzannah Wesley Community Center, Youth Outreach, and the ACLU.

Community partners have been grateful for the clinic, praising the students for their hard work and caring attitudes. Dawn Mahi, a program coordinator at KKV, said the students did a review of the literature regarding community health clinics that wouldn’t have been done otherwise. The result, said Mahi, was recognition that the KKV program is using cutting edge techniques used by outstanding programs nationwide.

“Having the students do that for us was very helpful,” said Mahi. “It’s value added...For instance, with Hawaii Literacy they volunteered at the children’s library and got a different perspective on child welfare.”

Mahi said she also saw the students gain tremendously from their hands-on community work.

“Students who have gone through this kind of experience are more ready for field work,” said Mahi. “They have more experience on the ground. That’s a really great benefit.”

Besides Skilling, course faculty also include: Faye Kimura from the Law School; Jane Dickson Iijima and Clifton Tanabe from Education; Janice Shultz from Nursing; and Dorothy Tsipolopolous from Social Work.