Real World Legal Experience

Laurie W. Jones, *Oklahoma City University School of Law*
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By Laurie W. Jones

What began as an informal conversation between two members of the OBA Access to Justice Committee after the committee’s May meeting has developed into a collaborative program pairing lawyers and customers of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) Child Support Enforcement Division (CSED) with first-year law students at Oklahoma City University School of Law. The committee members, an attorney who works in CSED as a programs manager and a law professor at OCU, realized that each had programs and people with needs and abilities that could be shared with the ultimate goal to improve access to justice for Oklahoma’s children and families.

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services Child Support Enforcement Division handles over 175,000 cases a year. The division has 43 offices throughout the state and is staffed by over 60 lawyers. When a child does not receive support from one or both parents, CSED lawyers locate the parents’ addresses and employers, establish legal paternity, establish child support and medical support orders, enforce support for married, separated, and divorced parents, modify child support orders and work with other states and countries to obtain child support. Between $15 and 23 million is collected each month for child support. CSED lawyers work tirelessly as economic advocates for the children of Oklahoma, ensuring that parents financially support their children, thus enabling families to become self-sufficient.

First-year law students at OCU take legal research and writing classes which require them to research and write objective legal memoranda during the first semester. Their first written assignment is typically due after the students have been in law school for a month. The students also take legal analysis, civil procedure, torts and contracts classes. After a month of law school, they have a basic understanding of legal doctrine, the role of lawyers and judges, and how the legal system is designed. They understand and can use basic legal terminology, can analyze cases, fact situations and spot issues. They are enthusiastic and eager learners and come to law school with a willingness to serve.

Although the case load of CSED continues to grow, some of the tasks necessary to litigate and monitor the cases can be handled by someone with some knowledge of the law, but not necessarily a license to practice law. The law students’ developing legal knowledge and skills, and consequent need to apply that knowledge and practice those skills, coupled with their desire to engage in actual client contact and to observe lawyers and judges at work, made this collaboration obvious.

This semester, 50 law students have been provided the research for and written their first legal memorandum on one of three topics encountered by CSED lawyers on a daily basis: modification of child support orders, contempt proceedings for failure to pay child support, and the inclusion of Social Security disability and retirement payments in income calculations for child support. In late September, CSED lawyers in the Oklahoma City metro area will conduct a training session for the students on child support, customer intake and interview procedures, how to fill out appropriate forms and orders, and the procedures for court contempt and arraignment dockets. In October and November, the students will participate in one of several “mini-clinical”
experiences where they will work alongside and under the supervision and guidance of the CSED lawyers. They will participate in a “show cause marathon” at one of the local CSED offices which will require them to assist with pre-hearing conferences for show-cause paternity hearings before an administrative law judge. Along with CSED lawyers, they will attend court dockets in Oklahoma County District Court for contempt and arraignment proceedings. There, they will assist in discussions with non-custodial parents, obtain information for forms and orders, and generally assist the CSED lawyers in ways that allow the lawyers to maximize their efficiency and to serve as many customers as possible.

The students will get a real-world legal experience and work closely with experienced lawyers — the lawyers will have extra minds and hands to help them with their caseloads. While all the participants will benefit, we hope that the greatest beneficiaries of the collaboration are the children and families of Oklahoma, who will have greater access to justice.

Ms. Jones is a legal research and writing professor at Oklahoma City University School of Law and is a member of the Access to Justice Committee.

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