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DOJ signs up two firms and two clinics in effort to combat domestic violence

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The U.S. Department of Justice has enlisted two law firms and two law school clinics in its renewed push to fight domestic violence.

Department officials on Wednesday announced a slew of initiatives, one of which is a pilot program in New Orleans and Baltimore that will pair law school domestic violence clinics with firms and legal aid organizations to provide pro bono representation of victims — a group that often goes without counsel.

The idea behind the Access for Justice for Domestic Violence Victims program is for law firms to hire recent law school graduates who have participated in a domestic violence clinic, then subsidize their full-time work at a legal aid organization for a certain period of time, said Tania Tetlow, the director of the Domestic Violence Clinic at Tulane University Law School in New Orleans.

Justice Department officials approached her with the idea for the project, and Tetlow in turn asked Adams and Reese to be involved. The clinic and firm are still working out the details, but they are also partnering with Southeastern Louisiana Legal Services, which offers assistance to low-income people.

"It's part of our firm culture to participate in the community, and as part of that we have a pro bono service requirement," said Paige Sensenbrenner, the senior partner in charge of Adams and Reese's New Orleans office. "This program to fight domestic violence by providing representation of victims is something that fits in perfectly with what we want to do. There is an acute need, and this gives us an opportunity to meet that need."

The firm is still ironing out the details of which attorneys will be involved, Sensenbrenner said, since some senior partners learned of the project and said they wanted to participate as well.

In Baltimore, the pilot is bringing together the Family Law Clinic at the University of Baltimore School of Law, a legal aid group called House of Ruth and Venable.

"We jumped at the opportunity," said clinic director Leigh Goodmark, noting the project will not only provide representation to victims but also give students interested in public interest more employment opportunities. "The economy has been particularly hard on nonprofits. It's harder to get a job that pays \$40,000 than one that pays \$140,000, I think."

The project has advantages for participating firms as well, she noted, since new associates will get real trial experience during their public interest stints handling protection orders and other related issues. There's plenty of need for that type of pro bono assistance, Goodmark said.

"We estimate that 90% of the litigants in family law cases go unrepresented," she said. "Access to representation makes a tremendous difference in their ability to obtain a protection order. Getting police reports and 911 tapes can be really challenging when you are dealing with the aftermath of abuse and raising your children."

The Access to Justice for Domestic Violence Victims program is just one initiative highlighted by the Justice Department Wednesday, including the Defending Childhood Initiative intended to protect kids from the consequences of witnessing domestic violence; the Sexual Assault Kit Backlog Action Research Project, which will look at the backlog of untested sexual assault kits; and the re-chartering of the National Advisory Committee on Violence Against Women.

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