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OAKLAND COUNTY

School takes legal help to Oakland, Wayne residents

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The wheels of justice are turning a bit more quickly these days in Oakland and Wayne counties, thanks to the University of Detroit Mercy Law School, which is dispensing legal advice to low-income seniors and others out of a mobile law office.



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The University of Detroit Mercy Law School provides free legal help to seniors and low-income residents out of an RV. On Friday, Annie Davis, 68, left, of Detroit talks with professor David Koelsch, 40, middle, and law student Michael Venturi, 24, of Windsor outside the Oak Park Senior Center. (Photos by MANDI WRIGHT/Detroit Free Press)

The program, which operates from a 29-foot RV, provides free legal assistance to people who otherwise couldn't afford it while giving law students practical experience to jump-start their careers.

"A lot of schools have clinical law programs, but this is the only one in the country that operates on wheels," professor David Koelsch said Friday, when the Mobile Law Office visited the Oak Park senior citizens center.

Koelsch said the \$75,000-a-year program, funded by the law school, the Oakland County Bar Foundation and the Jesuit Province of Michigan, was created in November 2003 with a \$25,000 contribution largely from the family and friends of attorney Joseph Conklin Sr., a 1951 graduate who died in 2002.

Although the law school has provided free, appointment-only assistance at its downtown Detroit law clinics for more than 40 years, school Dean Mark Gordon came up with the idea to buy a 1990 Ford RV so the school could take students and professors into the community.

Professor C. Michael Bryce, director of clinical programs at the school, and Koelsch, who runs the immigration law clinic, said the vehicle was retrofitted to create two offices.

Koelsch said the RV averages three visits a week to senior centers, community centers and houses of worship, primarily in Oakland and Wayne counties. Law students, under the supervision of Bryce and Koelsch, help people with consumer and immigration problems and difficulties in obtaining Social Security benefits.

If necessary, the students and professors refer people to lawyers. Sometimes, they take on the person as a client.

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Holly Kristan, 25, a third-year law student from Grosse Pointe, said she gets as much out of the program as the people she serves.

"It really enables me to connect a real-life problem with the cases I've studied," she said.

During the past seven months, the program has served about 500 people. Since its inception, it has recovered \$150,000 in Social Security disability benefits for seniors, the professors said.

On Friday, Koelsch and Michael Venturi, a third-year law student from Windsor, advised Annie Davis, 68, an insurance company retiree, about recovering an ambulance fee and insurance co-pays resulting from injuries she suffered in a slip and fall at an area supermarket in February.

Koelsch said Venturi plans to contact the supermarket this week to try to obtain reimbursement for Davis.

Davis, who had never consulted with a lawyer, said, "It was a wonderful experience -- a lot easier than I thought it would be."

*To find out about the program's scheduled stops, visit the school's Web site at <http://www.law.udmercy.edu/current/academics/mobilelawoffice.htm>, or call Koelsch at 313-596-9805. Contact **DAVID ASHENFELTER** at 313-223-4490.*

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