

EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS PRESS HIGHLIGHTS

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SUZANNE D'CHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

ENTRY LEVEL

Looking at the Whole Defendant

By ROBIN FINN

Even before she graduated from Stanford Law School in 2010, Michelle Parris, knew she wanted to help people with psychiatric disabilities and take a holistic approach to defense law. She designed a project with that in mind and received a two-year Equal Justice Works fellowship and an assignment at the Bronx Defenders. Still in the early stages of her fellowship, which began in September, she already has a caseload of 40 clients facing issues like homelessness, lack of access to health care, addiction, deportation and the ultimate nemesis of her project, criminal recidivism. A native of Queens, Ms. Parris, 27, now lives in Midtown.

Push from parents: My parents are of Caribbean descent — my mother is Puerto Rican and my father is Jamaican — and it was always impressed on me that my older brother and I had opportunities they didn't have. They pushed us to succeed academically; they helped me get a scholarship to the Spence School. I knew there were a lot of ways in which I didn't fit in, but it didn't bother me. Then I went to Princeton. Looking around the community I came from, Laurelton, there weren't too many other neighborhood kids on that track.

Service-minded: My father worked for the Department of Correction and my

mother was a secretary at a public high school. Since both parents obviously worked for the city, I guess I grew up with the mind-set to do some sort of public service.

Appeal of medicine: I thought I wanted to be a doctor because I wasn't queasy about the sight of blood and I liked watching doctor-related shows, and scenes with surgery, on TV. But when I went to college and took chemistry and calculus, I realized being a doctor was probably not going to happen. I majored in history and graduated in 2004 not sure of my career path.

Paralegal stint: I wanted to get some exposure to what being a lawyer would be like, so for two years after college I was a paralegal in the litigation department at Davis Polk. There was a lot of sitting in an office in front of a computer, and it just wasn't the right fit for me.

Assignment abroad: I applied to the Princeton in Latin America fellowship program, which is a one-year work assignment at a nongovernment organization, a nonprofit. I went to the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress in Costa Rica; the former president of the country had won a Nobel Peace Prize, and he started the foundation with the money he won. We worked on issues like demilitarization, com-

munity-building and women's rights. That year spurred me on to get back to the public service mind-set and also to apply to law school.

Honing a niche: In my second semester, I received an Equal Justice America fellowship to do housing work and eviction defense in East Palo Alto. That summer I did an internship at the Bronx Defenders, and I knew by the end of the summer this was where I wanted to work.

Clients in crisis: We practice holistic defense. It's about the clients as people in crisis, not just some case we're arguing before a judge. There are so many collateral consequences that follow any arrest. And there's a lot of discrimination against people with psychiatric issues. They're a particularly vulnerable group.

Caring: I love my clients . . . because they're lovable. I'm doing something a little different within an organization I already thought was great.

Prosecutorial ambitions? No, never! I can't imagine being in the position of prosecuting someone. Our job is to essentially look at the best in a person. Just because a person made mistakes doesn't mean they're not redeemable. I can't imagine being on the other side.

Capital Comment Blog

Your guide to the region's top events, mixed with some commentary about life, media, gossip and politics in Washington, DC.

Legally Speaking: David Stern

The Equal Justice Works head chats with us about how to convince more young lawyers to choose public-interest work

By [Marisa M. Kashino](#)

David Stern, executive director of Equal Justice Works, isn't like any of the other lawyers featured so far in Legally Speaking. He doesn't represent corporations, and he doesn't bill by the hour. He heads a leading nonprofit organization that connects law students and young lawyers with public-interest fellowships and other opportunities to provide legal services to indigent and marginalized communities. With Equal Justice Works' 25th anniversary coming up this fall, Stern talked to *Washingtonian.com* about the impact his group is making and why enthusiasm for public-interest work among young lawyers continues to grow.

How and why did you choose public-interest law?

I grew up in a family that cared a lot about social-justice issues. My father was particularly active in campaign-finance-reform issues. My mother did a lot against the Vietnam war. I grew up in a household where the dinner-table conversation was a lot about inequalities and social justice, and so I knew when I went to law school—as many people do—that public interest and social justice was my calling.

I spent a summer working for Trial Lawyers for Public Justice. Now it's

called Public Justice. We had the case featured in the book *A Civil Action*, the Woburn case, where we were co-counsel. Those are the kinds of cases—the very exciting ones—where you feel like “wow, we're on the cutting edge.”

I worked for a small commercial firm for six months and really disliked it. We had a case involving a mall and Friendly's ice cream, and Friendly's ice cream didn't renew their lease on the day they were supposed to, so the mall didn't want to give them that space. To this day, I don't remember whether we represented the mall or Friendly's ice cream. It was all about money. After that case, I [knew] this wasn't for me.

How did you land at Equal Justice Works 18 years ago?

[My wife and I] traveled around the world for nine months. By getting off of the treadmill, it really gave us a chance to reflect. Halfway through the trip, both my wife and I said we weren't going to go back to our jobs. I came back and was literally walking down the street, and Ralph Nader's right-hand man, his name was John Richard, was walking the other way. He said, “So what are you doing?” I said, “You know, I'm looking [for work].” He says, “I have the organization for you,” and he sent me over to the National Association for Public Interest Law, which is [now] Equal Justice Works.

You've traveled all over the country to find investors to fund your fellowships. What about Washington's pro bono and public-interest ethic stands out?

Washington is both a mecca for public-interest organizations and also for pro bono culture. I think the rest of the country looks to Washington as the hub and the model. It's actually one of the most refreshing things for me when I talk to lawyers, especially those in big firms, and they recall why they went into the profession in the first place. They all recall a public-service yearning.

It's true that many students go to law school because of that kind of yearning, but few stick with the goal of doing public-interest work. What's the key to convincing someone that the six-figure law-firm gig can wait and public service is worth a try?

If anything, there's been a significant bump in those numbers since President Obama has been in office. He has certainly inspired a lot of people to do public-interest work. So more people have that public-service bug when they start law school. Unfortunately, yes, law school strips that away in many respects. It tries to teach lawyers to think in sterile, analytical ways without a lot of heart. There's also



Photography Courtesy of Equal Justice Works

a lot of competition in law schools for those coveted six-figure-salary jobs, and so people are malleable, they're generally young, and all of these activities—the sterile thinking, the going after the coveted job, the very large educational debt—often strips away those public-service aspirations. Our job is to keep those embers burning. We do a conference and career fair where people come and have a chance to get employed by public-interest employers but also to hear other students, so they feel like they're part of a community. The second thing is the summer public-interest internships and clinical programs [we set up]. More than anything else, these early experiences—where you look in the eyes of somebody who's in need of public service, and you use your legal skills to help them—that's a very powerful moment.

What do Equal Justice Works fellows actually do? What impact are they having?

The most inspiring part of the job is to see young graduates come up with so many interesting ideas to solve problems. One [candidate I recently interviewed] proposed a project involving human trafficking down in the South, where people come into this country in search of the American dream—sometimes they're illegal, sometimes they're legal—but employers will burn their passports, put them in vulnerable positions where they're afraid to go to the authorities when they're not paid their wages or are treated poorly in the workplace. This person has a project specifically to help those people who are in these positions, to work with organizers who know these workers, and to try to get them the visas that entitle them to stay in this country and get protection from their abusive employer. I'll give you one example of one of our fellows who's in Chicago right now. There's something called a U-Visa, which is generally used by victims of domestic violence who can complain about the violence without fear of being deported. The same U-Visa law [could] also apply to workplace violence where an employer abuses an employee who's illegal, knowing there's very little chance that person's going to complain to authorities for fear of deportation. We have a lawyer whose working on using U-Visa in the workplace-harassment setting. The domestic-violence [use] is pretty settled. There are a lot of cases. But here's somebody who's now expanding the area of the law to cover workplace problems.

Since the economy has gone south, and many law firm jobs have dried up, has there been more interest in these fellowships?

There has been, but here's what I'd say about that: This is a question about whether it's the downturn in the economy causing the increase, or is it the increased appetite among students who want to do public-interest work? We've seen a bump up in the number of people who have expressed interest. Our applications are up 10 to 20 percent in the last two years. However, in looking through the applicants, their qualifications are as impressive as they were before. So it's not like people who just want to find a job and will throw their hat anywhere they can to find one are applying. These people have extraordinary qualifications in the public-interest field to do the project they want to accomplish. That's not an "I'll throw my hat in the ring" kind of thing.

REDBOOK

LIVERICHLY

"I lost my home —
and got it back!"

Strapped for cash and terrified for their families, these women refused to give in to foreclosure. Their lessons could keep *your* home safe. By Sara Clemence

SNIFF OUT SCAMS

Julie Danko's home in Kiln, MS, is surrounded by pine trees. In her front yard, there's enough sprawling green space for her kids to run around and a pond where the family's two Labrador retrievers paddle.

In 2006, a year after the family moved back to Mississippi following evacuation during Hurricane Katrina, Julie's husband, Matthew, took out a mortgage to build a house on land that his family had owned for years. He had put in months of 16-hour nursing shifts to save up for the home they had fantasized about building since they got married. "It's not a huge house," says Julie, 42. "But it's the biggest one we've had. I let the kids pick out the colors for their rooms, and we painted the whole house together as a family. We were just so happy to be back in Mississippi that we wanted to make it feel like home again."

Sadly, the local economy has been far more unpredictable than they had anticipated. Both nurses, Julie and Matt found steady work at first, but after three years, positions became sporadic and offered lower pay than in the past. By early 2010, the couple had fallen behind on their mortgage and were facing foreclosure. That's when Julie started calling the 800 numbers of a few loan-modification companies, settling on one that promised that a team of "legal experts" would handle their case. The Dankos scraped together \$1,750 to pay for what they believed *p.176* ▶



Julie Danko on her porch with her daughters Jenna, 13, and Josephine, 6.

◀*p.172* would be a guaranteed loan modification. But three months later, they received notice of foreclosure. "I couldn't believe we had been scammed," Julie says, her voice catching. "And we had absolutely no more money to throw at the problem. At that point, you can't help but feel defeated."

But Julie *wasn't* defeated. She rebooted her search for help and found a nonprofit law firm, the Mississippi Center for Justice. Whitney Barkley, an Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps legal fellow there, had dealt with several foreclosure crises like the Dankos' in the previous year. "We've filed complaints against the loan-modification company with the New York Attorney General's office; that's where the company is based," Barkley says. "No company can guarantee a loan modification, no matter how much you pay them." Julie also reached out to Hope Enterprise Corporation, a community development organization. They filed all the necessary documentation for a loan modification under the federal Home Affordable Modification Program, launched in 2009 to aid struggling owners. It was approved within days.

"I couldn't believe we had been scammed. At that point, you can't help but feel defeated." — Julie

But winning their home back isn't the end of the Dankos' ordeal, since the loan modification knocked a mere \$32 off their monthly payment. "I'm working two jobs, and Matt is begging for as many overtime shifts as he can get; it's still hard to come up with the money each month," Julie says. "But we put so much work into this house, we're going to fight to hold on to it any way we can."

"I Lost My Home — and Got It Back!" - Page 4

5 TIPS EVERY HOMEOWNER SHOULD KNOW

If you're having problems paying your mortgage, you aren't alone. Across the country, homeowners are struggling to keep their heads above water in a recovering economy. Whether it's because of a job loss, mounting medical bills, or a home that's now worth less than you paid, the personal and financial stress of foreclosure can be overwhelming. Here's what you should know to avoid foreclosure.

By Whitney Barkley

1. Know how foreclosures are handled in your state.

Too many borrowers assume that foreclosure law is the same from state to state. Know the law in your state and, more importantly, know your rights in foreclosure. Don't assume that the foreclosure prevention strategy that worked for your Facebook friend in Massachusetts will work for you in Mississippi. In some states, called judicial foreclosure states, mortgage companies must have the approval of a judge before they can sell a home at foreclosure. In others, a home can be sold without the approval of the court. Working with a legal services attorney or a [housing counselor](#) approved by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) can help you better understand the laws in your state.

2. Talk to your lender. Call them and answer their calls!

In 2009, the Obama Administration created the [Home Affordable Modification Program](#) (HAMP), designed to help struggling homeowners stay in their homes. While not everyone qualifies, a HAMP modification can lower your monthly mortgage payments to 31 percent of your gross monthly income. Even if you don't qualify for HAMP, there are other ways your lender can help you resolve your mortgage delinquency. So be your own advocate! Ask your mortgage company to review your options. Waiting too long may disqualify you for some programs. After you have contacted your lender, call once a week to confirm that you are being evaluated for a loan modification, and keep records of every conversation with your lender. Make sure that the mortgage company has everything they need to make an informed—and *affordable*—decision for you and your family.

3. Get help for free.

Free HUD-approved housing counselors, on average, have a higher success rate than homeowners trying to obtain loan modifications on their own. These counselors are trained in the loan modification process and know precisely what banks need to make a decision. Counselors are also able to help you draft a hardship letter, assemble a realistic budget, and help explain your options if your application for a loan modification is denied.

4. Watch out for scams.

Never pay for a loan modification. Any extra money in your budget should be put into a savings account and used to pay your mortgage or to help you and your family transition into a rental home. Be especially wary of any company that *guarantees* a loan modification. No one, not even the best HUD-approved housing counselor, can guarantee that you'll get one. You can get more information on loan modification scams, or report a scam, at [loanscamalert.org](#).

5. Plan ahead for a possible transition out of your home.

Sometimes, not even the best housing counselor or attorney will be able to save your home. But as difficult as foreclosure may be, leaving your home without a plan makes life even harder. Think ahead. Where can your family go? Do you have the money to rent a house or an apartment? Will you need assistance? Will your children need to transfer schools? Being prepared for the worst is essential. Too many people exhaust all of their financial resources trying to stay in their homes and when foreclosure comes, find themselves unable to afford alternative housing. Plus, there are tax consequences for foreclosures and loan modifications, so consult a tax expert about what you might owe next year.

Whitney Barkley is an Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps Legal Fellow at the Mississippi Center for Justice. Through her service as an AmeriCorps Legal Fellow, Whitney has focused on foreclosure prevention and assisted homeowners throughout the Gulf area fight legal proceedings to help keep their homes. Equal Justice Works is a national nonprofit that creates public interest law opportunities for law students and attorneys to provide pro bono legal services to vulnerable communities and causes. Mississippi Center for Justice is a nonprofit, public interest law firm committed to advancing racial and economic justice. Supported and staffed by attorneys, community leaders and volunteers, the Center develops and pursues strategies to combat discrimination and poverty statewide.

Read more: [How to Stop Foreclosure - Tips For Avoiding Foreclosure - Redbook](#)

Americorps helps homeowners avoid foreclosure

By Lou Grieco, Staff Writer | Sunday, May 1, 2011

DAYTON — When Donnie Thomas faced his sixth foreclosure filed against him in nine years, he finally showed up with an attorney.

The difference was clear: He also finally got a true loan modification needed to save his home.

“We regularly see clients who have agreed to prior ‘modifications’ that were not in their best interest and cause them to re-default,” said Lauren E. Dreshman, an attorney working with Advocates for Basic Legal Equality Inc., a nonprofit regional law firm.

JIM NOELKER

Donnie Thomas stands on his porch on W. Stewart St. in Dayton that he almost lost after missing mortgage payments. Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps helped Thomas obtain a permanent loan modification under the Home Affordable Modification Program. Thomas is now in his home with an interest rate at 5% for the life of the loan.

Dreshman, 28, got Thomas’ loan changed from an adjustable rate that, at the time, was at 14.25 percent, to a 5 percent fixed loan. She is one of 14 Equal Justice Works “fellows” in Ohio. Eight of those, including Dreshman are funded by AmeriCorps.

Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps estimates that those eight fellows saved 233 Ohio families from losing their homes during the 2009-2010 fiscal year.

“What we’re doing is fundamental to the recovery,” said Cole McMahon, Equal Justice Works senior program manager for AmeriCorps. “You can’t put a dollar figure on that.”

Now in its 25 year, Equal Justice Works is one of many groups that AmeriCorps funds, like Habitat for Humanity. But with budget tightening, AmeriCorps is expected to see a 6 to 7 percent cut this year, and possibly more next year, McMahon said.

“We have lawyers who want to serve their country and are willing to do it for AmeriCorps pay,” McMahon said. “That shouldn’t be a political football. It should be who we are.”

Donnie Thomas, 40, bought his Stewart Street home, just west of the bridge, in 1995. One of his great aunts died, leaving it in control of other relatives, before he purchased it.

The original loan was for \$29,900, Dreshman said.

Thomas, who worked as a telemarketer, had trouble making his payments. His first foreclosure was filed in 1999. But each time, the lenders declined to take his home from him.

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HUFFPOST IMPACT

HuffPost Greatest Person Of The Day: Maria Citino Sfreddo Empowers Latina Domestic Abuse Victims

Huffington Post | Lucas Kavner | 05/17/11



Maria Citino Sfreddo has a voicemail greeting that's over a minute long. "Please speak slowly and clearly and I'll get back to you as soon as I can," she instructs in English and then follows with lengthier instructions in Spanish.

"I give people options," Maria, the creator of the Head Start Legal Clinic in Chicago, told HuffPost. "That's what I'm there for."

Maria, who grew up outside Columbus, Ohio, is not a native Spanish-speaker. "I'm the Italian Maria," she said. "Not a Latina one."

But she fell in love with the language in high school. She built houses in poor communities in Mexico and taught English as a second language at a local after-school program.

For her high school senior thesis, she created a unique ESL tool kit. "It sounds like a bigger deal than it was," she laughed.

While studying social work at Miami University, Maria worked in Hamilton, Ohio, with [Help Me Grow](#), an organization that aims to provide families with health care and other services within the state. It was there that she was first introduced to the deep and often impenetrable communication gap that existed between the Spanish-speaking community and government services.

"This was a town where the sheriff had put an '[Illegals Enter Here](#)' sign at the entrance to the jail," Maria said. "People were scared to apply for public benefits because they didn't think anyone spoke the language or wanted to help them. Some women thought that if their kids played outside, President Bush would send them to the Middle East. They were completely unaware."

With the goal of working specifically within the Spanish-speaking community, Maria's path continued through law school in Denver, where she took "Lawyering in Spanish" classes and learned the complex terminology unique to the language.

After school she headed back to the Midwest and soon, with support from Greenberg Traurig and an Equal Justice Works Fellowship, developed the Head Start Legal Clinic, with a focus is on domestic abuse cases within the Spanish-speaking community.

"I'd always been interested in women's issues, but I didn't know if I could stomach these cases or understand them," she said. "But once I got more involved and learned more about domestic violence and how things play out the way they do, I couldn't imagine working in any other area."

According to a [study](#) by the UIC Center for Urban Economic Development, 34 percent of Latina women in Chicago have experienced domestic violence. To complicate matters further, Maria explained, Latina women are specifically threatened with much more than physical abuse.

"There's a perceived risk of deportation if these women seek help," she explained. "The abuser says: 'I'm not going to help you get a green card or a visa if you don't do what I say, I'm going to take your kids from you, you'll be deported.'"

Biding her time between 10 different pre-schools on a weekly basis ("That's the best way to reach people," Maria said, "since they're able to tell their abusers that they're just 'dropping their kids off at school,") Maria leads "Know Your Rights" presentations and attempts to forge unique legal options for families.

"I'm there to empower these women," she said. "A domestic violence survivor doesn't need some attorney coming in and saying what they should or shouldn't be doing. She needs someone saying, 'Here are ways I can help you, but its your choice, it's your decision.' "

She lets undocumented clients know about the Violence Against Women Act and [U visa](#), both of which provide residency options and support for victims of domestic violence.

"I try to come at this from a legal standpoint," Maria said. "I have to make it clear that there's something they can do to change this."



Champions of Change

WINNING *the* FUTURE ACROSS AMERICA

Lan Diep



Lan Diep is an [Equal Justice Works/AmeriCorps Legal Fellow](#) who serves as a member of a regional oil disaster legal advocacy team – a five-state consortium including attorneys from Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida – that provides education and free legal assistance to communities affected by the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster. Jointly funded by the [Mississippi Center for Justice](#), [Southeast Louisiana Legal Services](#), and [Legal Services of Alabama](#), Lan travels between the three states providing outreach and assistance to populations impacted by the spill and in need of legal advice and representation.

As the eldest son of Vietnamese refugees, Lan is particularly concerned about the Vietnamese American community in the Gulf, who are generally limited in their English proficiency but account for a third of the region's fishermen. He not only hosts informational community gatherings to educate the Vietnamese American community about their rights and legal options, but also publishes a Vietnamese newsletter distributed throughout the region to further inform this underserved population.

Lan graduated from the [University of California, San Diego](#) where he earned dual bachelor degrees in Political Science and History. After college, he worked in Washington, D.C. as an international broadcaster for [Radio Free Asia](#). Lan then earned his J.D. from the [University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law](#) where he specialized in international law. In addition to his service as an Equal Justice Works/AmeriCorps Legal Fellow, Lan also serves as a civilian Vietnamese language consultant to the Department of Defense as charter member of the [National Language Service Corps](#).

'Do-gooders' thrive

Public service jobs see a spike in popularity and prestige.

More freshly minted lawyers are opting for public interest careers, indicating a shift in the way those careers are perceived and how young lawyers prepare for public interest jobs.

Karen Sloan | June 27, 2011

In 1990, Harvard Law School Dean Robert Clark made the fateful decision to fire the only career counselor devoted to helping students land public interest jobs. The move was intended to rein in costs, but it didn't go over well with students. They protested until Clark relented and restored the funding.

Flash forward 21 years: Harvard's Office of Public Interest Advising is thriving, with the equivalent of eight full-time counselors and a steady stream of students seeking career advice.

The growth of that office reflects a larger shift in the way public interest law careers are perceived and how young lawyers prepare for those jobs. More freshly minted lawyers are opting for public interest careers — the percentage of new law graduates taking those jobs grew from 2.1% in 1990 to 6.7% in 2010, according to the most recent data from the National Association for Law Placement, or NALP. (That figure jumped by nearly 2% in 2004, when the organization began including public defenders — prosecutors are in a separate government category.) At the same time, the number of graduates from American Bar Association-approved law schools increased by 21%, meaning that the total number of new public interest lawyers is up significantly.

Among the factors leading to that growth are improved job support on law school campuses for public interest-minded students, more clinics and internship opportunities, more programs to help public interest lawyers manage their educational debt, and the founding of several groups focused on funding public interest careers.

The largest of those organizations, Equal Justice Works, is celebrating its 25th anniversary, prompting reflection on the dramatic changes in so-called "do gooder" law during the past quarter-century.

"There's a much greater professionalism in the path to public interest law careers now," said Alexa Shabecoff, assistant dean for public service at Harvard. "When I went to law school [during the 1980s], there was no specialized advising. There was nobody to tell you how to create a public interest career."

Today, Shabecoff said, nearly every law school has at least one career counselor who specializes in public interest jobs. Equal Justice Works Executive Director David Stern said that public interest law careers are shedding their second-class status. "The prestigious jobs, when I went to law school, were the big-firm jobs," said Stern, who graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 1985. "Everybody coveted them. I'm not saying that has gone away completely, but I would absolutely say that the prestige of public interest work has gone way up."

'POTHoles AND BARRIERS'

The founding and steady expansion of Equal Justice Works and other public interest law organizations is another sign of the changing times. Equal Justice Works started in 1986 as a loose consortium of student groups on law school campuses.

"It really came from a perception on law school campuses that the profession wasn't living up to its ideals," said Michael Caudell-Feagan, a founding director of the program, who was a student at George Washington University Law School at the time. "For young lawyers, the path to public service was filled with many potholes and barriers, and we could simply do better."

Only a half-dozen law schools offered loan repayment assistance programs to graduates holding public interest jobs in 1986, and it was not uncommon for law students to ask classmates to donate a portion of their earnings from summer law firm clerkships to fund public interest internships. More than 100 law schools now have loan-forgiveness programs.

Equal Justice Works had about a dozen member law school members in its early days, but has 199 today. In the 1980s, the organization became an important tool for students to organize and advocate for additional support from law school administrators and the legal community.

Today, Equal Justice Works has a staff of 30 and finances 700 summer public interest internships and 170 post-graduate fellowships each year, making it the largest single funder of post-graduate public interest law jobs in the country. The organization's budget has grown from well below \$100,000 during its first year to \$11 million, with the bulk of the money coming from law firms and corporations. Approximately \$3 million comes from the federal government, \$500,000 from foundations and about \$350,000 from law schools, Stern said.

"It's a continuum," Stern said. "We want to get [candidates] when they are thinking about law school. Then when they are in law school, we want to ensure they have these affirming experiences like clinics and summer internships. Then you have the post-graduate piece. It's all part of a formula that goes to the dream of mobilizing an army of lawyers to do public interest work."

Equal Justice Works isn't the only organization helping clear the path to public interest law careers. Just two years after its founding, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom launched its Skadden Fellowship Foundation, which each year funds 25 two-year public interest law fellowships. Skadden has sent more than 600 lawyers through the program, and interest from prospective fellows has been growing, said director Susan Butler Plum.

"We receive about 210 applications each year," she said. "During the last four or five years, that number has grown about 5% annually. The culture is changing. Their résumés now show two or three pages of public interest experience."

Law schools and foundations have started funding small numbers of public interest post-graduate fellowships. The proliferation of law school clinics — the Clinical Legal Education Association lists more than 1,000 clinicians now teaching at law schools — has also been crucial to helping students prepare for public interest careers, said Georgetown Law Center professor Peter Edelman.

"Clinical legal education has expanded tremendously," he said. "That's terrific preparation for any law practice, but it's essentially public interest-oriented. The development of clinical programs has been a big step."

Public interest employers now want applicants who have demonstrated a commitment to that type of work through extensive skills training and multiple public interest internships, Shabecoff said. That commitment can start even before law school with experience in Teach For America, AmeriCorps or other public service programs, she said.

The combination of low pay and high student debt has long been a hurdle to public interest law careers, however. According to NALP, the average starting salary at law firms nationally is nearly \$103,000, compared with \$42,000 for public interest jobs. The rise of loan forgiveness programs at law schools has helped on that front. Additionally, Congress in 2007 passed the College Cost Reduction and Access Act. That legislation allows college graduates to make monthly payments on their federal loans according to a sliding scale based on

income. Perhaps most important for public interest lawyers, the law guarantees that any remaining federal student debt will be forgiven for those who remain in public interest jobs for 10 years.

A LIFESAVER

The new rules went into effect in 2009 and were a lifesaver for Katherine Ojeda Stewart, a 2010 graduate of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Law who earns \$44,000 a year as an Equal Justice Works fellow in Los Angeles. She is carrying approximately \$200,000 in student loan debt from law school and a master's program. Her monthly payments but for the federal legislation would be about \$1,400 — more than half her monthly take-home pay. But she pays nothing under the income-based repayment provision of the federal act.

"Every time you see those loans, it literally will take your breath away," said Stewart, who plans to stay in public interest work for 10 years, until her debt is forgiven.

The single-minded focus on nabbing a high-paying law firm job has dissipated somewhat on law school campuses, public interest advocates said. That's due in part to the advent of the loan-forgiveness programs, but also because of a cultural shift.

"I came into law school as a die-hard for public interest, and I was amazed at how isolated I felt," Stern said. "Everybody else was contemplating these big law firm jobs. It's very hard to create a sense of community and belonging that enables somebody to hold onto that commitment. That's a pretty radical change that's happened over the past 25 years. Now, most schools have people designated to be the cheerleader and main resource for public interest-minded students."

Still, Stern sees much more work to be done during the next 25 years, given the vast, unmet legal needs. Equal Justice Works received funding from the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to put 30 attorneys in the field for a year to handle foreclosure defense cases. They helped 1,086 families remain in their homes, but Stern was sobered to learn while on a visit to Illinois that 50,000 homes face foreclosure in that state alone.

"As much as I think we make a hell of a difference, compared to the justice gap, we are a drop in the bucket," Stern said. "My vision is that we're just getting started. We've got to come up with new and better ideas about how we're going to meet these challenges."

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Equal Justice Works Fellow Katherine Ojeda Stewart

Photo: Jamie Rector

Katherine Ojeda Stewart

June 27, 2011

Katherine Ojeda Stewart was heading toward a career as an academic in ethnic studies when an internship at an immigrant rights organization in San Francisco changed her trajectory. The organization focused primarily on legal services, and Stewart found herself helping on wage-and-hour cases brought by day laborers.

"I loved it, and I knew I wanted to go to law school," she said.

Stewart said goodbye to the doctorate track and enrolled at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Law. While there, she interned at the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law in Los Angeles and taught classes on family law as part of its Mothers Behind Bars program. She spent the summer after her 2L year as a clerk in the federal public defender's office.

Stewart never doubted that she belonged in public interest law, but the prospect of landing that first job was scary, given the recent economic collapse. She applied for a two-year postgraduate fellowship from Equal Justice Works in 2010 and was approved.

She now works at the Harriett Buhai Center full time, counseling women who have been released from custody about family law matters including divorce, paternity and probate guardianship cases.

"My project really tries to figure out how I can reduce the barriers these women face in re-establishing or maintaining relationships with their children," she said. "Are they pretty cases? No. But I think they're really important cases."

After nine months, Stewart is enjoying her work and has had several opportunities to represent clients in court. Mentors warned her that the cases would be difficult, she said, but that didn't fully register until she was in the trenches. "I have lost clients for whom I spent four months working on their case. They relapse and drift off into the ether. That's hard."

But Stewart has no intention of backing away from public interest work when her fellowship ends next year. She's already brainstorming how to pursue funding that could keep her at Harriett Buhai.

"I want to keep working with families impacted by incarceration," she said. "Still, it's not like there's a bunch of public interest jobs just lying around waiting for somebody to pick them up."

— Karen Sloan



*Advocates for Children of New York deputy director Matthew Lenaghan
Photo: Rohanna Mertens*

Matthew Lenaghan

June 27, 2011

Matthew Lenaghan worked for three years in a Houston high school during the mid-1990s through the Teach For America program. The attitude some of his fellow educators took toward students with special needs left a sour taste in his mouth.

"One of the negative things you hear is people say, 'If you have a kid with behavior problems, just write them up constantly so you can kick them out of your room,' " Lenaghan said. "What that means is, 'Write them up constantly, so they can store him somewhere he won't bother anybody but won't necessarily be educated.' "

So when Lenaghan enrolled in New York University School of Law in 1996, he set out to prepare for a law career serving disadvantaged young people. He took a juvenile defense clinic and interned at a youth services organization before landing another internship during his 3L year at Advocates for Children of New York — a nonprofit organization that advocates for the educational rights of children.

The group was a good fit for Lenaghan, and he applied in 1999 for a two-year fellowship through Equal Justice Works to start a program dealing with students, usually young minority men with behavioral problems, who had been taken out of mainstream classes and placed in restrictive environments. His fellowship application was accepted and Lenaghan earned \$32,500 a year for two years, jointly funded by Equal Justice Works and Greenberg Traurig.

The work was anything but easy.

"When I first started, we just didn't have any kids who graduated," he said. "Special education in New York City is kind of a wasteland. We perform triage and take on the worst cases. My first couple of years, it just seemed like we didn't have any kids who graduated high school at the end of the day. Each year, it seems like more kids we've worked with have had positive outcomes."

Advocates for Children of New York brought Lenaghan on full time in 2001; he moved up through the ranks and is now the organization's deputy director. In that role, he has helped oversee several other Equal Justice Works fellows.

"When I graduated, it certainly felt like anybody who needed a corporate law job was not finding it hard to get," Lenaghan said. "But public interest organizations have difficulty with funding, and it seemed like we were fighting much harder for fellowships than some of the people who were earning considerably more than us."

— Karen Sloan