



Cal Western to host international conference on legal incubators

By **LYLE MORAN**, The Daily Transcript
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Since the first incubator for lawyers was established at the City University of New York in 2007, programs that help train lawyers to address the unmet legal needs of the public have taken off across the country and are starting to gain traction worldwide.

San Diego has been at the forefront of the movement, with California Western School of Law opening the first West Coast incubator three years ago. Its Access to Law Initiative has doubled in size by adding a second downtown location.

Thomas Jefferson School of Law also has an incubator to try to meet the strong demand for affordable legal services, and it works very closely with the California Western program.

In recognition of San Diego's role in the growth of the industry, California Western has been chosen to host the second annual international conference on legal incubators and residencies next month.

"From the very beginning, San Diego has been a model city for incubator development because two law schools not only have created incubators, but they also collaborate," said Fred Rooney, who founded the first legal incubator and has played a key role in the creation of many others.

Rooney, director of the International Justice Center for Post-Graduate Development at Touro Law Center in New York, said another reason San Diego was chosen to host the Feb. 27-28 conference is because of Bob Seibel.

Seibel, director of California Western's Access to Law Initiative, has been one of the national leaders in promoting the development of legal incubators and played an integral role in the first conference last year at Touro Law Center, Rooney said.

Seibel said the school is very excited about the opportunity to host the conference because the mission of legal incubators aligns closely with its mission.

"Cal Western has a long history of supporting and leading in pro bono work, and we have a long history of training our students to be ready for practice," said Seibel, who oversees up to 18 attorneys at two locations.

Most legal incubators provide shared space, as well as training in business development and other practical professional skills.

Participating lawyers are typically required to perform a certain amount of pro bono and public service work, with California Western requiring 100 hours.

The incubators have grown in popularity as larger firms have retrenched because of the economic downturn and as new lawyers seek to grow in practical skills they may not have developed in law school. They also provide lawyers the chance to learn from one another.

Eight years after the first incubator was launched, Rooney said there are at least 35 operating presently, including the first international one in the Dominican Republic. He expects the numbers to continue to increase.

"I think 2015 will be a banner year for incubator development in U.S. because the interest is off the charts," Rooney said.

California Western Dean Niels Schaumann said he is thrilled the school was selected to host the incubator conference because he also thinks the movement will only continue to grow and have a larger impact.

"The whole incubator movement has tremendous potential to change the way we do legal education and social justice," Schaumann said, while also praising the important training it provides new lawyers.

The purpose of the upcoming conference is to bring together both people who have started legal incubators to share their experiences and best practices, as well as representatives from schools, bar associations and other organizations interested in starting new ones.

A key focus will be how legal incubators and other graduate programs for solo, small firm and nonprofit practitioners can improve social justice by boosting the access low- and moderate-income individuals have to legal aid.

"The opportunity to get together and share what others are doing, or have tried to do, should be one of best rewards of the conference," Seibel said.

He also is planning tours of one of California Western's incubator sites and of Thomas Jefferson School of Law's Center for Solo Practitioners in downtown San Diego.

Rooney, who logged more than 140,000 miles of travel last year promoting incubators, said he hopes attendees interested in starting one realize it is very doable.

"The message I try to get across is that it's neither difficult nor expensive to create these types of programs," Rooney said.

The first international conference drew more than 120 attendees, including visitors from Europe, Africa and India.

Rooney said he received very positive feedback from attendees and expects an even larger contingent this year.

Both he and Seibel said another reason it is fitting that the conference will be held in San Diego is because of the State Bar of California's strong support of incubators.

The California Commission on Access to Justice is joining California Western, Touro Law Center, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law and the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on the Delivery of Legal Services in sponsoring the upcoming conference.

The state commission also recently selected four incubator projects to receive a combined \$185,000 in grants through the state bar's Modest Means Incubator program.

The first wave of grants were given to collaborative efforts in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, Orange County and the San Joaquin Valley.

"This is a wonderful first step in nurturing the next generation of lawyers providing legal services for everyday people with modest means," California Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu, chairman of the Access Commission's grant review committee, said in a prepared statement.