

## Growth of legal incubator movement on display at conference

By [LYLE MORAN](#), The Daily Transcript  
Tuesday, March 3, 2015

*Editor's note: This is the first in a series of stories about the recent international legal incubator conference in San Diego.*

When proponents of legal incubators held seminars several years ago about their efforts to address the unmet legal needs of the public, they say they were thrilled to draw anywhere from a half-dozen to a dozen people.

This past weekend, 160 people gathered at California Western School of Law for the second annual international conference on legal incubators and residencies, a 33 percent increase in attendance over the first gathering last spring.

Incubator pioneers said the large turnout and excitement among attendees demonstrates the state of the movement — which has seen an increase in the past three years from a handful to at least three dozen incubators worldwide — is as strong as it has ever been.

Fred Rooney, who founded the first incubator in New York eight years ago and oversaw the launch of the first international one in the Dominican Republic in 2013, said he expects the momentum to continue, especially with additional projects funded or on the drawing board.

"We have the energy. We have the drive," said Rooney, of Touro Law Center in New York. "We have the ambition to push our institutions to be able do more and to be able to serve the millions of the people in this country who don't even have a prayer of ever seeing a lawyer."

Directors of incubators, law school leaders, bar association representatives, judges and attorneys were among those attending the event.



*Fred Rooney (left), who launched the first legal incubator, with Bob Seibel, director of California Western's Access to Law Initiative. Photo Courtesy of California Western School of Law*

They traveled from across the country, as well as the Caribbean and Eastern Europe.

Bob Seibel, director of California Western's incubator program, the Access to Law Initiative, said the broad mix of attendees, including many with hopes of starting incubators, was another testament to the vitality of the movement.

He also said the increased interest should provide a boost to the efforts to reduce the so-called "access to justice gap"; some studies estimate that more than 80 percent of the essential legal needs of low-income people in the U.S. go unmet.

"It tells us the appeal of this idea is really much broader than the typical law-school-generated idea," Seibel said. "That's important because the problem is big and it needs the support of a lot of different resources."



About 160 people gathered for the second annual international legal incubator conference at California Western. Photo Courtesy of California Western School of Law

Incubators typically provide shared office space for solo practitioners or small-firm lawyers, along with the training and mentorship to help new attorneys build sustainable practices serving those of modest means.

One of the main goals of the conference was for individuals from institutions overseeing incubators to share their experiences and lessons learned, while encouraging others to launch new ones.

Two of the programs highlighted were the Access to Law Initiative and Thomas Jefferson School of Law's Center for Solo Practitioners in San Diego, the first city with two incubators.

Attendees were given tours of the Thomas Jefferson site and one of two Access to Law locations downtown, which features beautiful views of the city and the bay from high up in the Symphony Towers. They also heard from the leaders of the programs, both of which launched in 2012, about their success.

"I hope San Diego will continue to innovate so we can take what we have already done and build on it to come up with even better and more useful ideas," said Lilys McCoy, director of the Center for Solo Practitioners.

Alaska Magistrate Judge Suzanne Cole and Alaska Pacific University professor Mara Kimmel, both of Anchorage, were among those eager to launch an incubator.

They said they hope to start a program with lawyers providing affordable legal services to victims of domestic violence and Alaska's native people. Kimmel said the conference boosted their resolve to move ahead.

"We are the only the state in the country without a law school," said Kimmel, also a board member at the Alaska Institute for Justice. "I think now I understand that is not as big an obstacle as I thought it was."

Layke Martin, assistant dean for external relations at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' William S. Boyd School of Law, said her school hopes to open an incubator next year.

Martin said the conference showed her that incubators can not only train lawyers to provide affordable legal services, but also be a place where law graduates test out new or niche practice areas.

"There were so many people doing exactly what we want to do and who were willing to share their experience, their information, their tools and their budgets — all the stuff you need to get one of these up and running," Martin said. "That was tremendously helpful."

Bill Adams, a partner at **Norton Moore & Adams** in San Diego, is the co-founder of a local group called the Public Interest Advocacy Clinic, which has as one of its goals training law students and attorneys how to advocate in the public interest.

He said he came to the conference to get a better sense of whether his group, which also plans to bring public-interest litigation, should establish itself as a formal nonprofit.

"Now I feel like it is viable and there is a whole community out there that has been doing the same thing," Adams said.

The annual conferences are expected to continue, with another key figure in the movement, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law Professor Tony Luppino, offering to host at his school next year.

But top leaders also proposed establishing a formal consortium for incubator programs that could provide a more frequent dialogue and a way to secure more funding.

The feedback to the idea crafted by Rooney, Seibel and Luppino was largely positive. They will incorporate it and move forward with a more formal proposal.

"As the movement has grown in ways we would never have imagined, the need to try to coordinate efforts all over the country has become even greater," said Rooney, director of the International Justice Center for Post-Graduate Development at Touro Law Center. "That's why the development of a consortium is so important."

## **Solo practitioners cite benefits of legal incubators**

By [LYLE MORAN](#), The Daily Transcript

Wednesday, March 4, 2015

*Editor's note: This is the second in a series of stories about the recent international legal incubator conference in San Diego.*

As the longtime owner of San Diego Music Studio, Robin Sassi says that being a small-business owner can be lonely and isolating.

So after Sassi graduated from California Western School of Law a few years ago, she hoped to work at a law firm where she would have colleagues with whom she could share the ups and downs of being a new lawyer.

But after months without finding a job, Sassi started doing legal work on her own.

It was during that time, in 2012, when she was approached about joining California Western's planned Access to Law Initiative, an incubator providing space and training for new lawyers wanting to serve clients of modest means.

Sassi joined the first group of eight attorneys, found the camaraderie she was looking for and her legal career has been on the rise since.

Just two weeks ago, she argued her first appeal in a case that had been referred to her while she was in the incubator.

Sassi has since graduated, though she occupies space just down the hall from one of the Access to Law's two downtown locations. She said the support she received from other solo practitioners was invaluable when facing new challenges.

"You have other people saying, 'Go for it, you can do it,' and then you do it and you realize it's not that big of a deal," said Sassi, 43, who practices mostly business litigation. "It helps make you brave."

Sassi was among the lawyers who highlighted the benefits that incubators provide to new lawyers at the second annual international conference on legal incubators and residency programs hosted by California Western last weekend.

Ronza Rafo, a graduate of Thomas Jefferson School of Law's incubator, the Center for Solo Practitioners, said she also enjoyed the positive environment.

Rafo, a solo practitioner who focuses on family and immigration law, still leases an office in the same downtown space as the incubator, as do some other graduates.

"Whenever I have a question, I don't hesitate or feel awkward to walk down the hall and ask one of my colleagues if they can help me, because they are willing to," said Rafo, 30. "It is not cutthroat. It is not competitive."

Before joining the Justice Entrepreneurs Project incubator in Chicago, Rachel Boehm worked as a paralegal at a large law firm in the city and entered law school with the hope of one day having wealthy and prestigious clients.

But Boehm says as she became more involved in the firm and drew closer to becoming a lawyer, she grew uncomfortable with how the firm's clients were treated.

The final straw was the day a domestic-violence victim came in for an initial consultation teary-eyed and with bruises on her face.

A secretary informed Boehm's boss that the woman could not afford to pay, and Boehm remembers her boss responding, "If she can't pay me, I'm not going to meet with her." The woman left sobbing.

"That's when I knew that this was not how I wanted to practice law," said Boehm, 31.

After graduating from law school, she decided to launch her own practice to have the freedom and flexibility to "genuinely help people."

Boehm joined the Justice Entrepreneurs Project last year as part of a class of nine lawyers.

The incubator allows her to be around other attorneys like her who are working to provide affordable legal services to clients while still making money, such as through limited-scope representation, where she would assist with part of a case, she said.

"I find creative ways to give them the service they need at a price they can afford," said Boehm, who practices family law.

Edwin Schwartz said something he cherishes about being a solo practitioner at the Access to Law Initiative is the ability to set his own schedule.

It is especially important for Schwartz because he said he went to law school after working years as a high-end car salesman so he could spend more time with his family. The flexibility lets him attend many of his twin 7-year-old daughters' softball games.

"Even though I might put in 60 to 70 hours, having control over those hours is a big deal," said Schwartz, 45, who does business and real estate litigation, as well as personal injury work.

Schwartz said he has received some good leads from the incubator's hotline, but he and his colleagues have learned that business development work to secure more clients is essential. "If you don't have the mindset to run your own business, then participation in an incubator probably is not going to be for you," he said.

## **Law school deans praise legal incubators**

By [LYLE MORAN](#), The Daily Transcript

Thursday, March 5, 2015

*Editor's note: This is the third in a series of stories about the recent international legal incubator conference in San Diego.*

California Western School of Law Dean Niels Schaumann said he is thrilled that the legal incubator his school launched three years ago is helping new lawyers provide affordable legal services to low- and moderate-income people.

But Schaumann, like other deans at the second annual International Legal Incubator Conference hosted by California Western last weekend, said the positive effects of incubators also extend beyond efforts to reduce the country's access-to-justice gap.

He highlighted that the school's Access to Law Initiative, which has two downtown locations offering space to solo and small-firm practitioners, allows the school to provide ongoing learning for its graduates.

The training and mentoring that is part of the program can be especially helpful to new attorneys in a challenging job market, he said.

"One of the things deans have learned over the last five years is that it is very important that we not view our endeavor as a three-year program, after which our alumni go out into the world and we never hear from them again," Schaumann said.

The University of Massachusetts School of Law started its Justice Bridge incubator last year.



*California Western School of Law Dean Niels Schaumann (left) at the international conference on legal incubators his school hosted. Photo courtesy of California Western School of Law*

Mary Lu Bilek, dean of the school, said the program has brought UMass Law an advisory board of people who are "movers and shakers" in the Boston bar and local bars that support the incubator's mission.

"I'm building a lot of support from allies and people in powerful places — people with the capacity to support this program and other justice-related programs of the law school," she said.

Bilek also said the program has had a positive effect on the law school's faculty, which she believes will pay dividends for students.

She allows faculty members, many of whom have experience working at small firms, to take relief from an elective and spend a semester working in the incubator as mentors.

"The faculty doing Justice Bridge is going to change the way they teach substantive courses," Bilek said. "It's going to change the way they think about what skills they need to help the students with as they start off."

Ellen Suni, dean of the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, said the incubator launched through her school in 2011 was an outgrowth of the school's efforts to help students who wanted to become solo and small-firm practitioners.

She said too many law schools act as if most of their students will go to large law firms, while statistics show that is not the case.

“If your schools are willing to play the reality game, incubators are where the action is,” Suni said.

Some of the deans on the panel said they have been told by admission officers that prospective students like hearing about incubator programs.

“We talk about it at every open house,” said Patricia Salkin, dean of Touro Law Center in Central Islip, N.Y., which operates the Community Justice Center of Long Island.

But the law school leaders also acknowledged that launching an incubator is not without challenges.

Among them are whether tuition dollars should support a program for graduates and what type of liability a law school faces if one of the attorneys in an incubator gets sued for malpractice.

Sean Scott, senior associate dean of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, recommended that law school administrators who are considering launching an incubator meet with a variety of officials to discuss possible difficulties early in the process.

She said the gathering should include members of the finance, career services, advancement and admissions departments, as well as the risk manager and at least one representative from alumni.

Similar meetings as the process moves along are opportunities for the group to decide how to tackle obstacles, she said.

Salkin said keeping things in perspective and with the goal in sight helped her school launch its incubator.

“It was important as a dean to not let the perfect be the enemy of good,” she said.

### **Judges: Legal incubators should include appellate lawyers**

By [LYLE MORAN](#), The Daily Transcript  
Friday, March 6, 2015

*Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series of stories about the recent international legal incubator conference in San Diego.*

Two state judges recently offered strong support for legal incubators that groom attorneys to provide affordable services to those in need.

But the jurists, both members of the California Commission on Access to Justice, encouraged the programs to expand their efforts to include training lawyers who want to serve clients of modest means at the appellate level.

When low- and moderate-income people can't afford an appellate lawyer and represent themselves, the key legal issues at play are often left unaddressed, the judges said.

"There are a ton of questions in family law that desperately need to be answered and the appellate issues are not getting teed up in a meaningful way for our appellate courts," said Judge Mark Juhas of Los Angeles County Superior Court.

He recommended that legal incubators, which provide space and support for new solo and small-firm practitioners, welcome lawyers who want to handle appeals.

"I don't see why you couldn't incubate them like everybody else," said Juhas, the 2015 chairman of the Commission on Access to Justice.

Juhas made his comments during the "Views from the Bench" session at the second annual international legal incubator conference hosted by California Western School of Law.

Judge Ronald Robie, who serves on the 3rd District Court of Appeal in Sacramento, said that too often, cases in his court are not being resolved based on the central legal issues.

One reason for that, he said, is when both parties choose to represent themselves for financial reasons and don't properly litigate the matters at hand.

But Robie also said that another common problem is mistakes made by lawyers at the trial-court level that hurt their clients' cases on appeal.

"We need to bring some appellate lawyers into the incubators to deal with young lawyers and (help) them learn how to recognize the fact that there are some things you can do to help your case at the appellate level," he said.

Judge Juhas also urged leaders of incubators and participating attorneys to remember that individuals are not the only potential clients in need of affordable legal assistance.

He said there are a lot of small businesses, such as technology startups, that can't afford full-service lawyers.

When incubators expand their reach to serve additional constituencies, Juhas said, they better fulfill their mission to address unmet legal needs.

"I think then the incubator becomes more successful in closing the access to justice gap we are all trying so desperately to close," he said.

In addition, the judges told conference attendees that the local bench is a great place to turn for support for their incubators.

Robie and Juhas highlighted that the judges on the state's Commission on Access to Justice, including Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu, have been strong backers of incubator projects.

The state commission earlier this year selected four projects to receive a combined \$185,000 in grants through the State Bar of California's Modest Means Incubator Project.

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

“With the strangulation of federal funds, and the constant battle for essential civil legal aid funds in California, this is a real opportunity for all of us who really care about providing justice to those who are in greatest need of it,” Robie said of the program.

Colorado Court of Appeals Justice Daniel Taubman, the third member of the panel, said the judiciary in his state has also been very supportive of efforts to provide affordable legal services.

For example, the judicial branch has proposed creating an organization that would coordinate access to justice efforts statewide.

“We are very optimistic the Legislature will provide funding next year, and we will be able to establish a statewide integrated access to justice entity that will include modest means representation,” Taubman said.

Juhas said the bench could also be of assistance on a more local level.

He suggested incubators reach out to judges to provide training on relevant topics, such as civil evidence.

“My experience has been that every time I’ve asked a fellow bench officer to do something, the answer has always been, ‘Sure, of course,’” Juhas said.

## **Legal incubator leaders hope for international growth**

By [LYLE MORAN](#), The Daily Transcript

Monday, March 9, 2015

*Editor's note: This is the last in a series about the recent international legal incubator conference in San Diego.*

The legal incubator movement, which has strong roots in San Diego as a result of two local programs, is growing rapidly across the country.

Supporters of the programs offering training for new solo and small firm practitioners who provide affordable legal services hope the next frontier for expansion is internationally.

Fred Rooney, who started the first and only international legal incubator in the Dominican Republic two years ago, recently said he is confident the programs will catch on in other parts of the world.

“I see the model as having such great potential because in most countries, lawyers don’t have anyone to help them when they get out of law school,” said Rooney, director of the International Justice Center for Post-Graduate Development at Touro Law Center in Central Islip, N.Y.

Developing incubators abroad was the subject of a panel discussion at the second annual international conference on legal incubators and residencies hosted late last month by California Western School of Law.

Rooney said another reason for his optimism about global growth is the success of the incubator he helped launch in the Dominican Republic in 2013 with the support of a Fulbright Scholar grant.

Participants have focused on assisting victims of domestic violence and members of the LGBT community who have faced discrimination, said Francis Checo, the legal adviser to the incubator.

The Dominican incubator has hosted both attorneys and law students, a contrast from programs in the United States that typically accept only law school graduates.

“Since there was no clinical legal education in the country, the incubator in many ways served as a clinical opportunity for the students,” Rooney said. “They just flourished.”

Checo, whose remarks were translated from Spanish, said he attended the conference at Cal Western along with a couple of other Dominicans to take the lessons learned back home to bolster the work of the incubator.

With the support of another Fulbright grant, Rooney is hoping to start the second international incubator in Pakistan this spring.

Rooney, who has already made two trips to Islamabad, said the participating attorneys will likely focus on serving victims of domestic violence, as well as people with disabilities.

He said he would like to see more incubators sprout up internationally in areas where the percentage of people with unmet legal needs is higher than in the United States.

“If we think it is bad here, it is really bad in different parts of the world,” Rooney said.

Europe is one continent that could be home to future legal incubators.

Ostalinda Maya, who traveled to the conference from Hungary, said she would like to start an incubator for aspiring lawyers of Roma descent in Eastern Europe.

She highlighted that more Roma people are graduating from college and many are going to law school.

Maya said the mission of incubators to reduce the access to justice gap would mesh well with the goals of future Roma lawyers.

“In my conversations with the law students, they all mention that they want to practice law because they want to make a difference for their communities,” said Maya, project manager of the Open Society Foundations’ Legal Empowerment of Roma Communities initiative.

In addition, Maya said that Roma people often feel isolated and are discriminated against, so an incubator could provide a space for young attorneys to support one another.

Zaza Namoradze, director of the Budapest office of the Open Society's Justice Initiative, also would like to see legal incubators launched in Eastern Europe.

Law students have been exposed to public-service work through legal clinics started around the world, Namoradze said, but he sees incubators as a way for graduates to continue the work after college.

"I hope in 15 years that globally there could be a vibrant movement on incubators as well," he said.