



Councilmen work with law school incubators to provide free legal aid

By **LYLE MORAN**, The Daily Transcript
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San Diego City Councilman David Alvarez said that from the time he took office in late 2010, he and his staff received many pleas for legal assistance but there was little they could do assist those reaching out.

During his travels throughout the city, he also met a number of passionate young lawyers who were eager to do more to give back to the community.

So when Luz Herrera, who was then working at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, contacted him about funding free legal clinics in his district that would be run by some of the school's graduates, Alvarez said he was intrigued.

Once he learned more details and realized the potential for the clinics to benefit those with legal needs and young lawyers, he was fully on board.

A partnership between Alvarez's office and the Center for Solo Practitioners, Thomas Jefferson's incubator program for graduates, was formally launched in 2013. It has resulted in hundreds of San Diegans receiving free legal guidance through clinics held the last two summers.

The ongoing collaboration also helped inspire a colleague, Councilman Todd Gloria, to start a similar collaboration in his district with the legal incubator operated by California Western School of Law.

"The partnership brings legal services to people unable to access them and gives young people the opportunity to provide that service and give attention to a community that needs them," Alvarez said of his work with Thomas Jefferson.

The clinics in his district have been held at the Otay Mesa-Nestor Library, San Ysidro Senior Center and Sherman Heights Community Center.

Attorneys from the legal incubator provide consultations to members of the public on legal topics ranging from landlord/tenant disputes to immigration law to family law.

Participants also can contact the attorneys afterward if they want to seek further services. Alvarez said he has received positive feedback from his constituents, with many asking when the clinics will take place again.

He also recently got the chance to share about the success of the partnership with Thomas Jefferson, including the dedication and passion of the participating lawyers, during an international legal incubator conference held in San Diego.

“I’ve seen lawyers that have come through the program stay involved in the community,” Alvarez said.

Lilys McCoy, director of the Center for Solo Practitioners, agreed that members of the public and the participating incubator attorneys have benefited from the clinics.

She said the lawyers sharpen their skills by working with people from all walks of society and get to see firsthand the demand for the type of legal services they desire to provide to low-to-moderate income clients.

Attorneys provided more than 195 hours of legal services to more than 315 people in the two summers the clinics have been held.

“I think this is exactly what those in the incubator movement have believed incubators can do from the start of the movement: That is, help young lawyers develop community-based practices while at the same time increasing access to justice,” McCoy said.

She also praised Alvarez for his willingness to take on a new endeavor and being a strong supporter of the project.

Alvarez’s office has provided just shy of \$15,000 for the first two rounds of clinics and has submitted a funding request so the next batch can take place this summer.

Gloria said Alvarez’s partnership with Thomas Jefferson and his own conversations with California Western officials prompted him to move forward with funding legal clinics in his district.

He was eager to support the approach because he had seen a great need for affordable legal services and wanted to help.

“I can fill a pothole, I can fix a streetlight, but I cannot necessarily resolve a landlord-tenant dispute or address a will issue,” Gloria said.

The attorneys from California Western’s Access to Law Initiative in January began holding clinics on the first Tuesday morning of the month at the LGBT Center in Hillcrest. They offer free 30-minute consultations to members of the public.

Gloria, whose office provided \$5,000 in funding, said the effort has been well received and there is a desire among the public for more of the service.

“It is a very minimal investment for my office for a significant return,” he said.

Bob Seibel, director of the Access to Law Initiative, said the clinics have been so popular that he is hopeful they could be offered twice a month, with perhaps one at a new location in Gloria’s district.

He and McCoy have also discussed the two local incubators coordinating their efforts and seeking support from additional city council members to offer similar services in more city neighborhoods.

“Since we have proved the popularity of the clinics and the demand for them, we are hoping some of the other city councilors will use some of their discretionary funding as well to support these efforts,” said Seibel.

Gloria said he expects other council members would be supportive of the clinic programs, especially since they require a small investment in exchange for a large positive impact. He also hopes to see foundations and other private groups that see the benefits of the clinics step up financially to help the incubators expand their efforts.