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Legal clinic seeks pro bono help for Syrian refugees

All can help The John Marshall Law School clinic, but attorneys' aid particularly sought

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Lawyers who have seen the jarring reports on war-torn Syria and thought "I wish I could help," take note: A local law school professor will gladly help make your wish come true.

Sarah Dávila-Ruhaak is the director of The John Marshall Law School International Human Rights Clinic. Recently, after seeing people's emotional reactions to the Syrian crisis, Dávila-Ruhaak wrote a letter calling for people to act on their emotions and help those whose lives are being upended as a result of the crisis on the other side of world.

While anyone can help, Dávila-Ruhaak said, she's particularly looking for attorneys.

The struggles that Syrians are facing has caused a number of emotions among Americans, Dávila-Ruhaak said, as they see sometimes graphic depictions of what's happening on social media or in the news.

"I feel like there is a disconnect between those feelings of sadness and anger and helplessness and then action," she said. "I think that particularly with the Syrian humanitarian crisis and conflict, I think that advocates in the U.S. have felt particularly helpless because they feel like it's so far away.

"I think it's really important to recognize those feelings and say enough is enough and figure out

what our next steps are, which are really important, getting into action."

Dávila-Ruhaak helped to do just that when one year ago the International Human Rights Clinic established a program specifically designed to assist Syrian refugees, called the Human Rights for Syrians Initiative. Since then, many of the approximately 50 to 60 students who have worked at the clinic this year have assisted in cases affecting those displaced by the Syrian crisis.

While there's plenty of opportunities to assist by making donations to any of the several organizations around the world aimed at helping Syrian refugees, Dávila-Ruhaak said she sees firsthand in her daily work that there's a lot of hands-on assistance those here in the Chicago legal community can offer, she said.

The clinic has worked with dozens of Syrians, including refugees who have been resettled and Syrians who are seeking asylum. In the case of those who have already been determined to be refugees, the clinic can assist them in a variety of legal issues they face.

"We have so many refugees who have been resettled in Illinois," she said. "Even though they are resettled and legally they are protected in staying, there's a host of legal issues and social issues that come with resettlement."

In the case of asylum seekers, the clinic has seen a need for legal

assistance at different stages of the yearslong process for individuals to seek asylum, Dávila-Ruhaak said. Most of the individuals the clinic sees are people who have grounds for applying for asylum and are beginning the process, but it also helps those who are in the middle of their asylum cases.

Since the initiative was formed in January, Dávila-Ruhaak said the clinic has been "swamped."

"I feel additional pressure to take on more cases because people are in such need and there's just not enough people who can provide free legal services," she said.

"But because there's not enough people taking these legal cases, I've seen many people being denied with potentially good cases with grounds for asylum. It's such a shame to see that so many people who could benefit from that legal protection are not because of the lack of access to legal services."

The clinic receives intake calls from around the country and abroad, in which case they can help connect refugees and asylum seekers to attorneys or other clinics or organizations. She said she's found that work to be critical because some people in the Syrian community in the U.S. "felt like they didn't even know where to start," she said.

The cases the clinic takes on must involve people who are in Illinois. If the clinic can't take it, she said, they can refer individuals to a number of other organizations working to advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers, including the National Immigrant Justice Center, the DePaul University College of Law Asylum & Immigration Law Clinic or attorneys who may take cases pro bono or on a limited-fee scale.

The John Marshall clinic also does direct advocacy for asylum seekers who are in "higher danger," which Dávila-Ruhaak explained can mean they've been blacklisted abroad or have been tortured or detained or are a well-known political activist. In the case of direct advocacy, the clinic will write letters or provide research for attorneys who take on these cases of individuals in danger.

The clinic also takes on the cases of people who have had their asylum

applications denied and are being deported.

In its first year, the clinic's Syrian initiative has yet to see one of its clients attain asylum, but Dávila-Ruhaak said they're getting close. She noted that it's a lengthy process. People who applied for asylum in 2013 are just now being interviewed by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Although it's not work in which the clinic's students and volunteers see immediate turnaround, Dávila-Ruhaak said the students have found the work to be rewarding. She said student involvement in the International Human Rights Clinic has increased since the Syrian initiative was formed.

"They can effectuate change through legal work, which I think is one of the most empowering lessons they can get in law school," she said.

In addition to legal assistance, Dávila-Ruhaak said, she sees the clinic's work as a way to listen to those who sometimes have no idea of who to turn to for help in the first place.

"I feel like part of the work that we do in human rights is not just thinking about the legal case but thinking about our clients as humans with emotions with all of their complexities, and so I think people need to be heard," she said.

"You need to hear their concerns as their advocate because it's more than just filing papers, it's establishing that connection and for their voice to be heard."

Any lawyer who is interested in helping out, regardless of whether they have experience in immigration or human rights work, can be of help to the clinic, Dávila-Ruhaak said, and she encourages people to contact her at the school.

"I think that any way that [attorneys] want to be involved in the project would be wonderful. Whether it's taking pro bono cases or volunteering on parts of an asylum case or connecting us with organizations or lawyers or resources, we really need the whole spectrum of assistance," she said. "We really want to create sort of a network of attorneys who are working on these issues."

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