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## More legal help on way for needy

By Liesel Nowak  
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Charlottesville's Legal Aid Justice Center is hosting a new pro bono partnership between the University of Virginia School of Law and a Richmond law firm aimed at providing legal services to low-income residents.

The financial commitment from Hunton & Williams and UVa law is estimated at \$200,000 per year.

"I think we're ready to make it an ongoing partnership," said Alex Gulotta, executive director of the Legal Aid Justice Center, which is where the program will be housed starting in July. "The beauty is that we have a really robust relationship."

The program began last fall with a pilot partnership between volunteer lawyers and law students who handled cases for immigrant clients seeking asylum in the U.S. The program's success encouraged Hunton & Williams and the law school to expand

the alliance.

The project will likely double the legal assistance on the immigration front and will include family law services in cases arising out of abusive relationships, including child custody, support and divorce.

"As far as domestic abuse cases, it's a bottomless pit," said Kimberly Emery, assistant dean for pro bono and public interest at the law school. "There are plenty of clients who need help and plenty of students to volunteer, but it's hard to find that supervision, and that's what the lawyers from Hunton & Williams will provide."

The law firm is donating a full-time lawyer who has experience in family law litigation to help develop the practice and manage the office.

Expanding from the pilot program, the partnership will increase the number of student volunteers from eight to 20. Hunton & Williams will add at least six more lawyers to its four-lawyer pro bono team.

Emery said students will be putting in at least 10 hours each week in the new office without academic credit.

"It's purely to teach them their responsibility to do pro bono work and fit it into a busy schedule," she said. "Working with lawyers at Hunton & Williams will give them a look at big-firm lawyers who care and do find time to do this."

George H. Hettrick, a partner at Hunton & Williams and chairman of the firm's community service committee, said volunteer lawyers will gain valuable immigration law experience through the partnership while some will expand on their existing knowledge of family law.

"We think it's been very successful so far," Hettrick said. "I'll say this, for most of these lawyers, they are graduates of UVa so it's really something special for them."

In addition to contributing student volunteers, the law school is offering Emery's time to the pro bono office. She'll spend three days a week at the justice center representing clients, coordinating student volunteers and helping supervise the caseload.

The new partnership will find a temporary home inside the justice center in its recently renovated office at 1000 Preston Ave., but will make the move in 2006 to a permanent home in the Rock House behind the center. The justice center is renovating the arts and crafts-style bungalow as part of their legal campus.

With the International Rescue Committee, based in Charlottesville, providing help to refugees from around the world, the justice center has tried to take on more complex immigration cases.

Because they do not rely on federal funding, Gulotta said, the center's attorneys are able to represent a wider variety of clients, including those who are poor but earn too much money to qualify for federal help or those who have issues with immigration status.

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