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## The Family Justice Clinic: Increasing Access to Justice for Nevada Families in Need

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**“Our students are the FJC’s greatest resource and we seek to harness and develop their talents in service to the families of Nevada.”**

# Dean’s Column

BY GUEST WRITERS PROF. ANN CAMMETT & PROF. ELIZABETH L. MACDOWELL

## THE FAMILY JUSTICE CLINIC: Increasing Access to Justice for Nevada Families in Need

The Family Justice Clinic (FJC) at the William S. Boyd School of Law was created to provide civil representation and support to low-income families in Nevada. Students enrolled in the FJC under Nevada’s Student Certification Order represent children, parents or guardians in cases including custody and visitation, guardianship, abuse and neglect, termination of parental rights, domestic violence, special immigrant juvenile petitions and other family matters. Typically, clinic cases are complex and outside the scope or capacity of existing community resources. Cases may involve contested trials, negotiations, administrative advocacy and cutting-edge legal and policy issues.

The FJC can take on the tough cases in part because we benefit from the wealth of student talent and drive at the Boyd School of Law. In turn, our mission includes teaching students to be reflective practitioners, to engage in multidisciplinary practices, to increase access to legal systems and to provide service to communities in need. These goals are fostered by the larger Thomas and Mack Legal Clinic at Boyd, of which the FJC is a part, and which also includes Juvenile Justice, Immigration, Appellate, Educational Advocacy and Innocence clinics, as well as the Strasser Mediation Clinic.

The breadth of Boyd’s program allows students to collaborate across specialty areas — a skill especially relevant to family law, where legal issues frequently extend far beyond the family code. The range of specialties and professional perspectives in

the clinical program also facilitates a holistic view of client issues, which in family law often requires thinking outside the box. Students consider cases in a law office environment, where interaction with their colleagues and professors stimulates deep reflection on legal methods and problem solving. In the words of current FJC student Kimberly Valentin, “Bouncing ideas off fellow clinicians with diverse backgrounds has allowed me to identify the optimal course for a case, often one that I had not contemplated.”

In addition to providing direct representation to clients, students also work on policy projects related to the FJC’s mission of helping Nevada families in need. To that end, the FJC has a particular focus on prisoners and their families, clients engaged with immigration issues and those affected by the child welfare system and other forms of state intervention that render poor families especially vulnerable. One example of this work is the FJC Collateral Consequences of Conviction Project. Collateral consequences are civil penalties, not imposed at trial, that severely limit a person’s access to employment, housing and other life necessities, simply because he or she has a criminal conviction.

In our experience, low-income families confront many challenges, but prominent among those challenges is a high probability of having family members struggle with the effects of a criminal conviction. Thousands of Nevadans will return home from prison in any given year and access to

jobs, occupational licenses, housing and other critical areas of life will be sharply limited. These consequences are invisible at the time a criminal sentence is imposed, but they are not collateral at all; rather they have an impact on the well-being of families and can directly determine whether ex-offenders can establish themselves with employment to support their children or get housing to obtain some measure of family stability. Students working on this project have collected data on state law and local resources for re-entry and have participated in the legislative process in support of proposed legislation intended to facilitate successful reintegration by addressing collateral consequences of conviction in Nevada.

As clinic student Shelly Dodson describes, "Working on the FJC's Collateral Consequences of Conviction Project has allowed me to see the law working on several different levels. It has also helped me understand the uphill battle those with little resources face when trying to make a new start after making a mistake that they thought they had already paid for, only to find out that they will have to keep on paying through civil penalties."

Our students are the FJC's greatest resource and we seek to harness and develop their talents in service to the families of Nevada. In turn, these future lawyers learn the personal value of service. Student Andrea Gandara states, "The most rewarding part of the FJC experience is that we get to help our community by providing counsel to people who may otherwise not be able to navigate the legal system." Because the majority of our students stay and practice law in Nevada, this mission is of deep and lasting significance for our state. ■

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**BOLD** honors multiple cases accepted and/or sessions conducted within the month.