Duke Law CED Clinic Begins Representing Small Business Owners

This fall the Law School’s Community Economic Development Clinic (the “CED Clinic”) began to represent small business owners on a variety of transactional legal matters. These services help to address the unmet need for legal services faced by minority and low-wealth entrepreneurs throughout the Triangle. The CED Clinic assisted 13 clients during the fall semester and provided approximately $30,000 worth of legal services offered at no cost to these small business owners. Additionally, this work provides Duke Law students with unique “hands-on” learning opportunities.

Through the CED Clinic’s small business initiative, students develop not only substantive legal knowledge about business associations, but also counseling, interviewing and drafting skills. In addition, students gain insight into some of the business issues that entrepreneurs face when starting or purchasing a business.

Lisa M. Walter, a third-year student who was enrolled in the CED Clinic during the fall semester, indicated that her experience working with small business owners was “wonderful.” “It is a great opportunity to learn the real world implications of what I was taught in business associations and other business law classes. Also, I really enjoyed working with our clients—they have such enthusiasm and commitment for their businesses.”

Marsha A. Early, a small business owner who worked with the CED Clinic this fall, indicated that the work of the CED Clinic was very helpful as she considered which form to choose for her business. “There is an awful lot to do when starting a new business,” said Ms. Early. “Information is available for small business owners, but the information can be difficult to understand. The clinic was extremely helpful in helping me understand different [business] forms and helped me understand the tax-wise aspect [of forming a business],” said Ms. Early.

As part of the small business initiative, the CED Clinic partnered with non-profits that provide technical assistance to small business owners. One of the CED Clinic’s partners is Good Work Inc. (“Good Work”), a non-profit that helps people start and expand businesses. This fall the CED Clinic made a presentation on choice of business form to a group of Good Work participants, which participants found to be very useful. “The presentation was right on target for the people who were there,” said Bessie Johnson Elmore of Good Work. Since the presentation, several Good Work participants have been working with the CED Clinic to incorporate their businesses and address other legal matters associated with their businesses.

By providing transactional legal services to small business owners, the CED Clinic addresses one of the critical barriers to the development of small businesses in the Triangle, while also providing valuable learning experiences for students.