



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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Court Improvement Program Sponsors Three Law School Externs to Focus on Abuse and Neglect Practice

For immediate release

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. – Rachael Mullins has a teaching degree from Marshall University and spent two years in the English department at a Logan County high school before realizing she loved the students but not teaching.

“I really couldn’t make the difference I wanted to with my teaching degree. I needed a law degree,” says Mullins, now a second-year law student at the West Virginia University College of Law.

The Logan County native is one of three externs in a new program that teaches law students to provide quality legal representation in abuse and neglect cases.

The externs are doing 100 hours of field work this semester and spending two hours a week in class. They are supervised by two attorneys from the Morgantown law firm Lyons Phillips Legal Group, PLLC.

The program is being funded by the West Virginia Court Improvement Program (CIP) Board, the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia’s designee to oversee federal grants that improve West Virginia foster care and judicial processes.

The CIP holds regular training sessions for active attorneys who are willing to be guardians *ad litem*, court-appointed attorneys who represent children in child abuse and neglect cases. West Virginia has 251 trained attorneys who can do such work, which is only 5.4 percent of the 4,631 active, in-state West Virginia State Bar members.

The state needs many more attorneys who are qualified to represent litigants in abuse and neglect cases so the CIP decided to work with the law school to encourage more students to pursue this type of work.

“Our primary goal with this partnership is to increase awareness about the opportunity to represent children and families in the abuse and neglect system and to give the externs hands-on experience in what constitutes quality legal representation in these cases. We want to increase the pipeline of attorneys who wish to practice abuse and neglect law so that children receive quality legal representation,” said Cindy Largent-Hill, Director of the Supreme Court’s Division of Children & Juvenile Services, which is managing the program and provides staff support to the CIP.

“We have a statewide need for more well qualified, passionate attorneys who will practice in abuse and neglect. We have some counties that are struggling to have sufficient abuse and neglect lawyers,” said Kristen Antolini, an attorney who is a member of the CIP Board. She supervises the externs along with attorney Teresa Lyons.

“I think this is the most significant need we have in the state from a legal perspective. We need the best attorneys we possibly can have representing children and parents,” Antolini said.

“Under the leadership of Cindy Largent-Hill, the CIP is working diligently to provide relevant legal education both at the WVU College of Law and for practicing attorneys. We are really trying to change the legal education process for the law school and the current attorneys,” Antolini said.

The externs are attending hearings, touring group homes and juvenile centers, making home visits, attending multi-disciplinary team meetings, doing legal research, and preparing legal documents.

Mullins had some experience in the field because she spent her 2021 summer internship at a non-profit that practices guardian *ad litem* work in southern West Virginia. She said the externship has given her broader experience, and the weekly classes have given her the foundational academic knowledge she needed.

“We are really getting to be on the ground and talking with judges and talking with practitioners and talking with families and foster parents. Teresa and Kristen make sure we are very included in the conversation,” said another extern, Carrie Miller, who moved to West Virginia to attend law school. “It’s the perfect combination of practical and academic, the balance of the two is something you don’t get in law school a lot. I feel very lucky to be able to have this eye-opening experience.”

Like Mullins, Miller did not initially plan to be a lawyer. She has an undergraduate degree in art history from University of North Carolina-Charlotte and a master’s degree in public administration from the University of Colorado-Denver. Then she decided to pursue public interest law.

“I knew I wanted to focus on juvenile law and family law in some kind of way,” Miller said. “I had personal experiences with my own family that were difficult as a child. My parents are divorced. I feel personally committed to help children.”

The third extern, Christian LaParne, said his interest in family law was sparked by his mother, a family practice attorney in central Pennsylvania.

“It’s so hard to see these little kids and where they live,” LaParne said. “I always like to feel like I am a positive impact on these kids. . . . I want to take the kids home with me. It’s shocking seeing the living situations these kids have that is way different than my upbringing. The kids touch your heart for sure.”

Mullins said, “If you are interested in family law, public defender work, or any kind of public interest work, then abuse and neglect is where you need to be. The kids are at the sole heart of public interest law.”

“The College of Law is grateful to have the opportunity to partner with the Court Improvement Program Board, as well as Kristen Antolini and Teresa Lyons, to facilitate this invaluable experiential learning opportunity for our students,” said Jessica A. Haught, the director of the law school’s Fitzsimmons Center for Litigation and Advocacy.

“Through these types of public service externships, our students develop essential advocacy skills and gain an appreciation of the real difference they can make as they advocate for children and families. Given the significant need for high-quality advocacy and representation of children and families in the abuse and neglect system throughout the state, the College of Law is committed to providing our students with these types of experiences and training to better equip them to practice in this important area and to serve our communities.”