

# Legal Aid Society of Orange County



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Senior Citizens Advocacy Program  
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Don DeBenedictis / Daily Journal

William T. Tanner of the Legal Aid Society of Orange County encourages law schools to pool their resources under his organization's incubator program for new lawyers in order to better serve low- and modest-income clients.

## Incubators capitalize on law school talent

By Don J. DeBenedictis  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

**S**ANTA ANA — Come January, 40 brand-new lawyers will begin serving clients at a converted Dairy Queen in Orange County. No, not Blizzards. Instead, they will be practicing law as part of the Legal Aid Society of Orange County's "incubator" program for recent law school graduates. They are expected to be representing primarily low- and modest-means clients with basic consumer and family law matters, including landlord-tenant and maybe some immigration, criminal or personal injury cases.

And they will be the recipients of training, mentoring and cheap rent provided by the society and its volunteers.

Such incubators have turned into a booming trend since the first one launched seven years ago at a law school in New York. The American Bar Association lists 26, though there may be closer to 40, and most are run by schools.

This new one is unusual because all four of Orange County's American Bar Association-accredited schools are jointly signing up to pool resources and new graduates with the legal

aid society's two-year-old program.

"I don't want the law schools to do their own," said the organization's William T. Tanner. "I want them to contract with Legal Aid to do it."

Deans see the plan as a win-win. "It's really exciting to me," said Allen Easley, the brand-new acting dean at Western State College of Law.

Schools have been thinking about starting incubators for several years, he said, but issues such as expense, office space, insurance and supervision hold them back. "You can't just set up an office and throw someone in there and say, 'Figure it out.'"

Incubators help schools meet the loud demand from regulators, clients and their own students that graduates have practice-ready skills, he said.

They also provide jobs for the graduates and improve schools' closely monitored employment statistics. Offering slots in the new incubator for 10 graduates "gives us the opportunity to put that much more effort into the other 90" members of Western State's class of 2014, Easley said.

Plus, there's the economy of size that the aid society's program offers, he said.

# Incubator gathers resources

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It already has office space, low-cost computerized legal research and staff and volunteer supervisors and mentors, agreed Martin H. Pritikin, the associate dean of Whittier Law School. In addition, "they are already training recent law graduates in the fields they focus on."

That focus is important. A principal goal of this and most all incubators is increasing legal services for poor and middle-class people. Nationally, the ABA Standing Committee on the Delivery of Legal Services promotes incubators.

In California, Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu heads a subcommittee of the state Commission on Access to Justice to do the same. This fall, the commission — a joint entity of the courts, the State Bar and others — will award small "seed" grants to incubator projects, according to Kelli Evans, the senior director for the administration of justice at the State Bar, whose office staffs the access commission.

Lawyers in the Orange County aid society's Lawyer Entrepreneur Assistance Program must commit to 300 hours of pro bono work over their year of participation. Many of their paying clients come from those who call the aid society but don't qualify for its assistance.

"Incubatees" also join the society's lawyer referral service, which will provide even more clients.

Participants first go through a "boot camp" on ethics and basic practice skills. They also get regular training classes on select topics, weekly case review sessions with retired bench officers and even occasional phone support from staff while at court appearances.

Current members can work from home but meet with clients at the society's offices.

But for the new participants, there's the Dairy Queen — which happens to be right next door to the one-time furniture store that houses the legal aid society's office. The aid group purchased it and is turning its 2,000 square feet into a reception area and six offices. The drive-thru portico may



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Forty new lawyers will begin serving clients next year from this converted Dairy Queen in Orange County through a legal aid group program.

become a patio, director Robert Cohen said.

The incubatees will be able to work in a bullpen area in the main building and then duck next door to meet clients at the new site, he said.

As the program grows, the law schools may also offer space and other resources. Whittier already has an incubator-like program that gives solo practitioner alumni guidance and assistance with the business of practice, including help with insurance, websites, business cards and more.

The ability to help graduates with that side of being lawyers is another reason legal aid-law school cooperation is a good idea, Whittier's Pritikin said.

"Legal Aid doesn't have experience in training recent grads in law office practice," he said. "Law schools could provide mentors [from their alumni] to give that business insight."

The Orange County plan has attracted attention from others. Working with UC-Irvine School of Law, the legal aid society won a \$15,000 ABA grant to hire a fellow next year, whose job will be to help package its plan as an "Incubator in a Box" for other aid groups and schools to copy, Tanner said.

On Wednesday, Tanner met with representatives from four Los Angeles-area law schools, four legal services groups, the county law library and the courts to describe the project.

The Los Angeles schools and aid groups are forming a consortium

to explore whether and how to create something like the new Orange County incubator. Meeting at the offices of Bet Tzedek Legal Services, the representatives brainstormed and hashed out concerns and logistics for several hours, according to Sumana Wolf, the assistant director of career services at Loyola Law School.

Ideally, the consortium could have a project running next year, possibly partially funded by one of the upcoming grants from the state Access to Justice Commission, she said.

Separately, Loyola will also open its own incubator in downtown Los Angeles in January. It would provide office space and training for 10 to 15 graduates of the class of 2014 currently awaiting bar exam results, many of whom are eager to participate, she said.

Incubators are the wave of the future in legal education, said Matthew S. McNicholas of McNicholas & McNicholas LLP, a Loyola alumnus who hopes to mentor in the school's upcoming program. "Law school education is no longer the X's and O's of the law," he said. "There's an expectation of transitioning folks to the workforce."

Pritikin said Whittier would be launching an incubator if the legal aid society's project weren't around. But at this point, he prefers the school-aid group collaboration.

"It really is a model that holds a lot of promise for the legal profession," he said.

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