



CUNY alum and Supervising Attorney for the Legal Aid Society's Health Law Unit Lisa Sbrana and Health Law Concentration Director Paula Berg

Callers phoning the New York Legal Aid Society's Health Law Unit face serious legal problems, including the denial of life-saving surgery, crushing medical debt, and the wrongful termination of Medicaid benefits. They've called the unit because they can't afford a lawyer. For many years, interns from CUNY Law School's Health Law Concentration have been among the people taking their calls.

HEALTH LAW CONCENTRATION

In the Field, Making Change

"CUNY Law students are very well-rounded and can hit the ground running," said Legal Aid Supervising Attorney Lisa Sbrana, a 1993 CUNY Law School graduate who was one of the first students in the concentration. "CUNY students are good listeners and make people know that they've been heard," she added. "They are very adept at sifting through each situation and making recommendations for potential cases. And," she noted, "when CUNY Law interns translate a caller's case into a fair hearing or an advocacy letter, it isn't just stilted legal analysis. They link the law to the facts in a way that's very compelling."

In 2009, for Sbrana's contribution to protecting the health-care rights of low-income New Yorkers, she was recognized with the New York City Bar Association's Legal Services Award.

This year she was honored with the Commission on the Public's Health System's 2010 Public Health Heroes and Sheroes Award.

"We have a very dedicated group of field supervisors who do interesting and important work and who have a real interest in teaching our students and being role models," said Professor Paula Berg, who directs the concentration, which has been co-taught with CUNY Law Professor Janet Calvo. "Field opportunities for students in health law are extremely varied in terms of substantive law and lawyering skills," she added.

In addition to the Legal Aid Society's Health Law Unit, students intern with the Attorney General's Health Law Unit, organizations focused on HIV/AIDS and other health issues, private firms handling plaintiffs' medical malpractice cases and suits against health insurance companies, government agencies that regulate health-care institutions, and hospital in-house counsel offices.

The curriculum and placements look at health care as a social justice issue. "One of our main goals is to teach students how to use the law to secure access to quality health care for vulnerable populations, such as the disabled, poor people, the elderly, and those with HIV," said Berg. Sbrana agrees that the concentration makes an important contribution to the field and to academia. "The Health Law Concentration has a unique perspective in its approach to health care as a human right and in the way that it links book knowledge to practical skills and real life," observed Sbrana.

"The most gratifying thing about teaching this program for so many years," said Berg, "is that there are now many, many Health Law Concentration graduates who, like Lisa, are doing great work and making a real difference." ●●