The Economic Justice Project

advocacy spans three distinct, yet related fields: college access for individuals who receive public assistance; school suspension; and low wage workers’ rights.

EJP continues to advance its core mission of expanding access to higher education as a pathway out of poverty for low-income New Yorkers. In March 2014, following years of advocacy by EJP and other community and advocacy organizations, the New York State Legislature enacted a law (initially drafted by EJP) that, for the first time, allowed welfare recipients to meet a substantial part of their “workfare” obligations through studies in four-year colleges.

A significant part of EJP’s recent work this year has focused on ensuring full and effective implementation of the new law. In addition to its systemic policy work, EJP continues its legal representation of individual students and their families, almost all of whom face daunting challenges on the economic margins.

This spring, EJP expanded its commitment to improving education access by creating the Suspension Advocacy Project. Supervised by Professor Babe Howell, clinic students serve as advocates for those facing superintendent’s suspensions at the K-12 level in the borough of Queens. In the first two weeks of the semester, EJP students and a handful of Defender students attended a two-day intensive introductory training. By the third week of the semester the Student Advocacy Project had opened its phone and e-mail intake lines, accepted its first two cases, and conducted its first hearing.

Spring 2016 marks the second year of a cross-program collaboration that joins CUNY 3Ls in the Advanced Community and Economic Development Worker’s Rights Project with 2Ls in EJP who elect Workers Rights as their project workgroup. Two ongoing federal wage cases, both in the Eastern District of New York, occupy the majority of the project’s time at present. The first case, involving workers at a car wash in Brooklyn, was referred by Make the Road NY. In the second case, the Project undertook representation of 20 Nepali gas station workers who had been organized by Adhikaar, a social justice organization based in Woodside and rooted in the Nepali community. The workers were subjected to an array of exploitative and unlawful practices.

Clinic students spent long hours over many months meeting with large groups of these workers, gathering information and developing legal claims. The clinic, together with the Legal Aid Society and law firm Kaye Scholer, is now pursuing a plenary action against the owners and managers, alleging multiple egregious violations of the federal Fair Labor Standards Act and the New York Labor Law. The clinic welcomes Ricky Blum, a staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society Employment Law Unit, who is working with Prof. Steve Loffredo on clinic supervision in this case.