The impact of a new local ordinance was clear: It primarily targeted Latinos, said third-year CUNY Law student Katie Meyers. Passed in a suburban enclave of Long Island, the law banned day laborers, most of whom were Latino, from soliciting work.

"I was in the field, meeting with community advocates and brainstorming means by which to organize Latinos who were suddenly prohibited from seeking the work that was so vital to supporting their families. It’s important that people affected by the law have a voice," said Meyers, discussing her field placement with LatinoJustice PRLDEF, formerly the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Challenging civil rights violations is at the heart of CUNY Law’s Equality Concentration. Through a range of social justice field placements, students learn firsthand how to apply constitutional law and civil rights statutes. Meyers said her internship with LatinoJustice PRLDEF also provided her with an opportunity to brief recent Supreme Court decisions for attorneys, including analyzing what impact these cases will have on future litigation, particularly disparate impact cases. "The fieldwork gave me an opportunity to extend the work I did as an undergraduate on contemporary race relations and discrimination."

Professor Rick Rossein, who runs the Equality Concentration, said that CUNY Law’s deep ties to the civil rights and social justice communities provide ample opportunity for solid, in-depth field placements. Student experiences might include conducting fact finding on a police brutality case, investigating discrimination claims, drafting a brief in a gender or race discrimination case, or assisting with depositions. "We have a strong network of field placements, and CUNY Law students are trusted by the organizations in which they are placed," said Rossein. "The students’ knowledge base allows them to be quickly integrated into a field placement and to take on important responsibilities."

"Through the years, CUNY Law interns have provided valuable legal research, client preparation, and pre-trial preparation in our constitutional and civil rights litigation," said Jackson Chin, an associate counsel at LatinoJustice PRLDEF. "We continue to support the School’s vision of incubating the next generation of public interest law practitioners and leaders."

Other field placements include the Center for Constitutional Rights; Legal Momentum; New York Lawyers for the Public Interest; the New York State Attorney General’s Office, Civil Rights Bureau; the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; the New York State Division for Human Rights; and private firms handling civil rights litigation.

"Our goal," explained Rossein, "is to pair on-site learning with doctrine, theory, and lawyering skills so that students get a well-rounded and strong knowledge base." Rossein added that those in the concentration examine racial and sexual discrimination and harassment in the workplace, in addition to affirmative action, sexual orientation, disability, age, and other potential discrimination issues. "Part of the pedagogy is to ensure that seminar teachings relate directly to the work the students do in the field. Unlike other law schools," he added, "we don’t just outsource our students into field placements. We closely supervise them, pay attention to their placements, and provide an opportunity for the students to learn from one another."

In addition to fieldwork and weekly rounds where students talk about the legal issues they are addressing in the field, the concentration includes group work, where students are put in small teams that then act as a “firm” on a hypothetical case. Through the simulations, students collaborate in lawyering exercises including developing the facts of a case, drafting legal memoranda, preparing discovery plans, drafting court complaints, and conducting examinations in a trial-like setting. "Throughout CUNY Law, whether it is in the clinics or in the classroom, we take a comprehensive approach, using everything from hypotheticals to field placements, all with the goal of integrating theory and practice," said Rossein.

From left: Student Katie Meyers, LatinoJustice PRLDEF Associate Counsel Jackson Chin, Equality Concentration Director Rick Rossein