

Cousins Public Interest Fellowship supports “new approaches” to indigent legal aid



Torin Togut (left), Georgia Law's first Cousins Public Interest Fellow, hopes to improve access to special education opportunities in Georgia. Alex Scherr, Georgia Law associate professor and director of civil clinics, serves as coordinator of the fellowship program.

This past spring, Georgia Law established the Cousins Public Interest Fellowship, an innovative program that offers experienced lawyers the chance to provide civil legal services to needy Georgians while engaging law students in the process.

Attorney Torin D. Togut is serving as the first fellow of the program.

Working in a two-year appointment, each fellow will initiate a project to provide much-needed legal assistance and will work with a host organization to support the program long term. Law students will help with the development of each project and, once it is operational, they will aid in the delivery of services.

Togut's project is clinical in design and focuses on special education cases, which incorporates the fields of medicine, psychology, education, psychiatry, social work and vocational rehabilitation.

Working with the Georgia Legal Services Program, Togut and eight second- and third-year students will assist children with disabilities and their families in navigating the “educational maze” in securing a free appropriate public education.

Under his direction, students will engage in client interviewing and case investigation, as well as appearing at negotiations with schools in an effort to obtain for children

what the law entitles them to receive. The clinic will introduce law students to fundamental administrative advocacy skills, as they may participate as advocates in mediation and in later due process hearings.

Alexander W. Scherr, associate professor and director of civil clinics, developed the idea for the Cousins Fellowship and now serves as coordinator for the program.

“We hope for this program to become a catalyst for creating new and innovative approaches to help indigent Georgians with civil legal needs. We also hope for law students to gain invaluable exposure to service in the public interest,” he said.

Students' responses to Togut's clinical program have been enthusiastic, Scherr said. The first course, offered this spring semester, was over enrolled and required Togut to narrow down the applications.

Before coming to Georgia Law, Togut worked for the Georgia Legal Services Program as a specialist attorney in mental health, health and education. He also worked in private practice in Georgia and Vermont representing children, adolescents and adults in the areas of disabilities, special education, mental health, disability rights and civil rights.

Togut said he saw the Cousins Fellowship as an opportunity to expand on the service component of his profession while combining it with the ability to teach and mentor law students.

Additionally, it was the lack of special education resources in the area that further encouraged him to apply and submit his proposal.

“There is a significant need for special education attorneys in this area of the state. There are a great deal of low income clients in Athens-Clarke County and the surrounding counties who need services and who would not have any access to these services but for this project,” Torin said.

Applications for the 2007-09 fellowship should be sent to Associate Professor and Fellowship Coordinator Alex Scherr.