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SUPREME COURT EXPANDS OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAW STUDENTS TO HELP THE INDIGENT

The Illinois Supreme Court announced Wednesday a change in its rules to allow law students in nearby states to help indigent clients under the supervision of an Illinois attorney.

Supreme Court Rule 711 provided that senior law students working in law clinics run by Illinois law schools could represent clients, including making appearances in court on their own, so long as the work was done under the supervision of a licensed Illinois attorney. The rule change now allows senior law students to do such work so long as the clinic is associated with any law school—not just those in Illinois—approved by the American Bar Association.

The immediate effect of the rule allows students at St. Louis University School of Law and Washington University School of Law in St. Louis to now represent clients in the East St. Louis and Metro East area in Illinois.

The idea for the change came from John Ammann, director of the Civil Law Clinic at St. Louis University School of Law, who approached Chief Justice Moses W. Harrison II about the possibility of a change.

Chief Justice Harrison, who is an ardent supporter of free and low-cost legal services for the poor, recommended the change to his colleagues, and the full Court approved it.

"Professor Ammann's civil law clinic at St. Louis University is only a few miles from East St. Louis and other areas in southern Illinois which are not presently being served by any university legal aid programs," Chief Justice Harrison said. "It has licensed Illinois attorneys on staff who could supervise students in the courts of Illinois, and it has students who would like to provide help here."

Mr. Ammann had worked at the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation in Illinois and is licensed to practice law in Illinois. The purpose of the legal clinic at St. Louis University and Washington University is to have students as much as possible handle cases with faculty supervision so that they learn by serving.

“I know there’s a great need for legal services in the Metro East area and our law school is just four miles from Illinois,” Mr. Ammann said. “Once I got here, we had requests from clients from Illinois but our students could not go to court in St. Clair County and Madison County because of restrictions in Rule 711.

“Chief Justice Harrison has spoken very eloquently about the need for an expansion of pro bono services to represent the indigent of Illinois and the rule change today by the entire Supreme Court opens up and makes available to the citizens of Illinois new resources for representing low income people.”

Mr. Ammann said that there are 15 to 20 students working in the civil law clinic during any one semester and they each handle an average of 10 cases. The cases include divorces, evictions, other landlord/tenant matters, foreclosures and traffic violations for homeless people to help them preserve their drivers license so they might be able to obtain housing and a job.

“We get requests frequently from people with cases in Illinois,” said Mr. Ammann. “We have people in homeless shelters in St. Louis who have been wrongfully evicted from Illinois or who have custody cases in St. Clair County.

“We can’t take every case but this opens the doors for St. Louis University and Washington University to be able to serve the people in the courts in Southern Illinois and to partner with Land of Lincoln legal services to coordinate the expansion of services to the indigent of Southern Illinois.”

The new rule change is the latest effort by the Supreme Court to improve the delivery of legal services to the poor in Illinois.

In a speech earlier this year, Chief Justice Harrison called on all Illinois lawyers to devote some part of every day to do legal work for those who cannot afford an attorney.

“If ordinary people cannot enlist the aid of lawyers when they need to, if the judiciary becomes a tool available only to the wealthy and powerful, the courts will become a source of oppression instead of what they should be: a sanctuary for the oppressed,” Chief Justice Harrison said when he received the 2001 “Access to Justice” Award from the Illinois State Bar Association last February.

A few months later, the full Court established a special committee of lawyers from around the state to study and make recommendations on how to encourage every practicing attorney in the state to render some form of free legal work those who cannot afford it. That committee is called the Special Supreme Court Committee on Pro Bono Publico Legal Service and is composed of three attorneys from Cook County and one from each of the other four Judicial Districts in the state.