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Grassroots 'Black Lives' Program Grows at Law Schools

The New York-based nonprofit network is made of up about 5,000 lawyers and includes a clinical program involving students from 18 schools who partner with advocacy groups to advance social change.

By **Angela Morris** | February 07, 2019

As part of the trend in “movement” lawyering, nearly 20 law schools across the country are part of Law for Black Lives, a grassroots program focused on racial and social justice.

The New York-based nonprofit network is made of up about 5,000 lawyers that launched in 2015 and includes multiple initiatives, including the one-year-old clinical program involving students from 18 schools who partner with grassroots advocacy groups to advance social change.



University of Texas School of Law students involved in Law for Black Lives. (l to r): Francis Wellin, Destiny Howard, Nicolas Sawyer, Madeline Waddell, and William Pavord.

"It's all about empowering people with the knowledge to uplift themselves," said SaFiya Hoskins, a third-year student at Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law."

During her second year, Hoskins participated in the school's Housing and Consumer Law, where she and a classmate completed a project that advocated for people experiencing homelessness to have access to housing through community land trusts, nonprofits that ensure housing affordability for homeowners, she said.

Law For Black Lives, by recruiting law students and lawyers to bolster the work of grassroots advocates, aims to rectify inequalities in the justice system born from the exploitation of labor and dispossession of property of indigenous and black people, said director Marbre Stahly-Butts.

"We see ourselves inheriting not a broken system, but instead, a system which at its core is rotten," she said.

With [Movement lawyering](http://www.law4blacklives.org/respond/) (<http://www.law4blacklives.org/respond/>), attorneys form relationships with communities and grassroots organizers, and take directions from them, working toward the social changes they're seeking.

A bail reform campaign in Virginia benefited from a Law For Black Lives project that involved six students at the University of Texas School of Law's Richard and Ginni Mithoff Pro Bono Program. Director Andrea Marsh said students tapped into Law For Black Lives' educational webinars that exposed them to leaders of national civil rights organizations, and lawyers working for black lives. An academic curriculum provided historical context for students about how the nation's history of racism and slavery are connected to present-day legal issues.

"This program in particular, I think, helped students make connections between the specific work they were doing and the larger context for the work in a way that was very educational," Marsh said. "Seeing the connection between the current criminal justice system and the history of this country helps them inform how they approach their careers as lawyers."

Other legal clinics participating in its program include top-ranked institutions like Yale Law School, Harvard Law School, Columbia Law School, the University of Michigan and Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law.

The students' clients in the clinics are made up of eight movement organizations including: the Atlanta-based National Black Food and Justice Alliance, a network of 20 African-American led farming and gardening organizations; New York City-based Picture the Homeless, which focuses on civil rights, housing and education of the homeless population; and the National Bail Out Collective, which includes 13 grassroots organizations that work to end pretrial detention and mass incarceration.

Students in the legal clinics focus on providing legal resources and research for movement organizations, said Erica Perry, partnerships director at Law For Black Lives in Memphis. They analyze legislation, help draft model bills, research litigation strategies and write memos about issues like housing, food deserts, unemployment, pretrial detention, money bail, alternatives to risk assessments and reparations.

Before Law For Black Lives partnered with the legal clinics, there was no way to practice movement lawyering during law school, Perry said. After just one year, the program has trained more than 60 students. Law For Black Lives spreads the impact further by hosting webinars and sharing student-drafted resources.

"Students have had the opportunity build relationships with local and national organizers through research collaboration. These relationships have given students the opportunity to practice movement lawyering," she said.

The law students made a big difference for grassroots advocacy groups.

Grassroots organizers aren't always connected to legal support, and it was a game-changer to get help from the law school clinics, said Jade Brooks, regional organizing co-lead of Southerners On New Ground, an Atlanta-based nonprofit with a Richmond, Virginia chapter that benefited from the Texas law students' work.

“It is essential for lawyers interested in devoting themselves to the movement for racial and economic justice to understand the everyday struggles, resiliency, grassroots brilliance and escalation strategies of direct-action campaigns,” Brooks said.

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