

Specialized Support Groups

Organization: Puerto Rico Legal Services, Inc.

Category: Collaboration, Partnerships, Mentoring Law Students

Problem/Challenge/Need:

To be able to respond to communities and/or groups requesting our services in complex and/or non-traditional areas of practice such as environmental, housing and the law of corporations as it relates to the communities (Community economic development).

Innovation Description:

During the last six years, the PRLS' Office of Community Work and Collaborative Agreements (OCWCA) has been immersed in coordinating efforts to bring together resources with particular skills and expertise in environmental, housing, and the law of corporations regarding community development from within and outside the Program, to litigate, educate and provide other services to community and non-profit organizations. These efforts include both formal and informal agreements with law school clinics, community groups, and non-governmental organizations that have brought together law school students and professors and environmental law attorneys to work together with PRLS' staff in litigation, community education and staff training in environmental, zoning and housing law.

The OCWCA has established Specialized Support Groups (SSG) to litigate complex community and/or individual impact cases. Staff attorneys and private attorneys, law students, experts, community and non-government organizations all participate in these SSGs. PRLS attorneys are experienced litigants that serve as mentors to law students. At the same time, law students do research and field work for Program cases which provide tremendous support for staff attorneys.

Examples of such Specialized Support Groups are:

1. SSG for Environmental cases: actions for equitable and injunctive relief opposing the installation of two extensive gas pipelines. The current proposed 92 mile pipeline threatens the health and well-being of poor communities and of the environment.
2. SSG for Housing cases: administrative and court claims against several projects affecting the homes of three thousand low-income families in the Municipality of Salinas and another one representing dozens low-income homeowners in the city of Ponce.

Result: PRLS is providing services to groups and /or communities, including legal representation, community education and economic development, with the support of outside program resources such as and law school clinics' students and professors, specialized private attorneys organizations.

Materials available: Pleadings, legal memoranda (in Spanish).

Additional information: In order to be able to respond to urgent requests for services in complex cases, which require special legal expertise and are time consuming, PRLS has entered into formal and informal agreements with outside resources to co-litigate cases and provide other services.

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Puerto Rico Legal Services Litigation Division

Office of Community Work and Collaborative Agreements(OCWCA)

NLADA CENTENNIAL CONFERENCE
December 8, 2011
Washington D.C.



The OCWCA

- Created during a 2007 reorganization, it provides support to branch offices' attorneys in community, groups and/or impact cases litigation.
- Coordinates the Program's collaborative agreements, including, e.g., Memorandum of Understanding with the American Red Cross.

The OCWCA

- PRLS has experienced an increase in demand for services in the form of community and group cases, particularly in areas such as:
 - environmental law
 - housing
 - law of corporations as it impacts community organizations

Community/Group/Impact cases

- Complex legal issues matters
- Specialized areas of law
- A community/group client is not the same as an individual client



Creation of Specialized Support Groups (SSG) to:

- **Help us litigate community/group/impact cases**
- **Improve services**
- **Harness valuable outside resources and expertise**
- **Serve as a practical learning experience in non-traditional service areas**

Process

- **OCWCA identifies common needs, interests between PRLS and law school clinics and ANDA, a non-profit lawyers corp. specialized in environmental law**
- **Law school clinics need scenarios where students can practice**
- **ANDA, Inc. attorneys need to develop experience in litigation skills**
- **Private attorneys have expertise but lack resources for complex litigation**
- **Law school clinics and ANDA have expertise in environmental law**

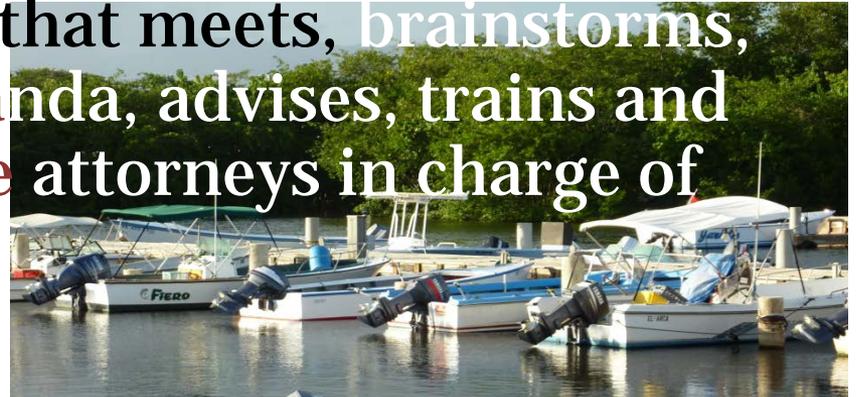
Process

- **Have access to experts**
- **PRLS attorney are experienced litigators**
- **PRLS' attorneys serve as mentors and/or provide clinical setting for students**
- **OCWCA identifies resources within PRLS staff in housing law and/or the law of corporations for community economic development**

SSG are organized as needed

For example:

- PRLS represents fishermen's associations in administrative and/or community economic development cases.
 - OCWCA identifies staff attorneys with expertise in these areas
 - PRLS organizes a SSG that meets, brainstorms, prepares legal memoranda, advises, trains and provides support to the attorneys in charge of cases



The “Playa-Playita Community Cases”

- Complex zoning and environmental law issues
- Cases were assigned to one staff attorney (Guayama Branch Office)
- Private bar attorney contracted in “judicare”-type relationship
- OCWCA organized SSG between ANDA-PRLS: this provided initial support, training in zoning law for PRLS staff attorneys and clients, in addition to preparation of legal memoranda

The Gas Pipeline Cases (“Gasoducto del Norte” Cases)

- **Extremely complex cases**
- **The proposed project will impact several communities with upwards of 200,000 residents, extensive wetlands, forests, and over 30 endangered species**
- **PRLS involved in 3 cases in state courts with ANDA and UPR Law Clinic**
- **Administrative cases in federal agencies**
- **Case in Federal Court**

The Gas Pipeline Cases (“Gasoducto del Norte” Cases)

- Two SSG were organized: one for state jurisdiction and another for the cases in federal jurisdiction
- SSG’s Composition:
 - PRLS Attorneys,
 - Director of the Environmental Law Clinic- University of Puerto Rico Law School and his students,
 - Interamerican University Law School Clinic and students,
 - Vermont Law School Environmental and Natural Resources Law Clinic Professors and students
 - ANDA, Inc. attorneys



Results

- **Community/Group cases litigation with excellence**
- **Learning experiences for all participants, particularly for PRLS staff**
- **Law School students see PRLS as a job opportunity place (recruitment tool for PRLS)**
- **Private attorneys provide pro-bono services**
- **Well-known experts provide pro-bono services**

Materials

- Pleadings, legal memoranda
- Co-counsel agreements

Contact Person

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Thank you