

SMU Dedman School of Law offers a free helpline for COVID-19 related legal issues

The current COVID-19 pandemic, the worst public health crisis the nation has faced in over a century, has left in its wake a host of perplexing legal questions. According to a November survey released by the Census Bureau, 9 out of every 100 people in the D-FW area fear they won't be able to pay their rent or mortgage in December. That's up from 7 out of every 100 people the month before. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that problem is even worse for Black, Asian and Latino households nationwide, 20% of whom are behind on their rent.

Many business owners have wondered when and how to reopen their businesses, and what safety measures they're required to provide both employees and customers.

For employees, what rights do they have when employers demand they return to work? If they return, what can they do about unsafe conditions like having to work next to sick employees or not having adequate amounts of PPE?

Where can tenants facing eviction, business owners, and employees find the legal assistance they need if they can't afford to hire an attorney?

SMU's Dedman School of Law COVID-19 Helpline

In recent months, one vital source of help in North Texas has been the COVID-19 Legal Helpline at SMU's Dedman School of Law. Operations began on June 1 with 45 Dedman Law students supervised by law school professors, a number of local law firms and more than 80 attorneys providing pro-bono assistance to individuals and businesses. Others involved in the project include the Dallas Bar Association, Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program (DVAP), Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, United Way of Metropolitan Dallas and UNT Dallas College of Law.

North Texas residents can secure legal information and assistance on matters related to COVID-19 including housing, immigration and consumer protection. In addition, small businesses can secure assistance on matters such as loan and grant programs, insurance, commercial leases and other general business matters.

A dedicated group of students and faculty will continue to staff the helpline throughout December and January and can be reached by dialing **214-SMU-COVD (214-768-2683)**.

"This project is a wonderful example of how deeply committed SMU is to helping our students and to serving the beautiful city in which we are so fortunate to be located," says Jennifer Collins, Dean of Dedman School of Law. "We are very grateful to have such committed partners and to be able to provide support to our community as we continue

to navigate these unprecedented times."

Serving the community and training students

The COVID-19 Helpline has two primary goals:

- To fill gaps in the availability of reasonably fast, reliable and necessary legal information and advice in certain key areas.
- To provide SMU law students with meaningful opportunities to develop important professional values and skills as they work collaboratively with each other, supervising law school faculty and volunteer attorneys.

"The helpline is an important resource for members of our Dallas-Fort Worth community who are struggling," says Mary Spector, Associate Dean for Clinics at SMU Dedman School of Law. "It also provides SMU law students the chance to gain valuable legal experience and professional skills. I'm proud of our students' eagerness to step up to the legal challenges the pandemic presents."

Housing questions are most frequent

The Dedman School of Law students accepted into the program received a week of focused training before embarking on two four-week sessions. Some volunteered, others received a small stipend for the work they did to provide aid.

Over the summer, the helpline conducted six phone shifts



The devastating impact of COVID-19 has also left those in the workplace and at home wondering how to make ends meet. To give back to communities hit hardest by the pandemic, students at SMU's Dedman School of Law are volunteering through the COVID-19 Legal Helpline. (Courtesy of SMU Dedman School of Law).

related to housing and much of the balance to employment-related questions. Since September, with the federal moratorium on evictions nearing its end, almost all calls have dealt with housing.

"It means so much to people"

One such person is the operator of a food truck whose many problems included being far behind on his rent. Through the

cares and has time to listen."

Norwood adds that callers often profusely express gratitude for the assistance. He also emphasizes that he too is grateful for the opportunity to be mentored by his law school professors, learn a great deal about landlord-tenant law and put that knowledge to work helping "real people."

"The North Texas legal community really came together on this project, and it feels good to know I played a small part," says Norwood.

Assistance for Spanish speakers

Another second-year SMU Dedman School of Law student, Andrea Cos Mora, says she never realized how rewarding and challenging the helpline work would be.

Reflecting on her experiences as a Spanish-speaking member

Cos Mora describes hearing the troubles of individuals and families as heart-wrenching, but believes the experience was worthwhile.

"Coming out of my first year of law school, the helpline was my introduction to the incredible ability we have as lawyers to help," Cos Mora says. "Ultimately, it made me realize that I chose the right career and that I am on the right path."

Hopes for continuing to help

Although the end of the pandemic may be in sight, there is no shortage of legal problems related to it. Associate Dean Spector hopes the COVID-19 Legal Helpline can continue to operate well into 2021 and throughout the summer. To do so will require additional funding.

Spector is hopeful individuals and organizations will step

forward and help provide the funds to continue this much-needed community assistance program.

Those interested in making a financial contribution or supporting the helpline project may visit the SMU Dedman School of Law giving page at smu.edu/law/giving.



Andrea Cos Mora (left) and Bach Norwood are two of the SMU law students who are answering calls to the COVID-19 Helpline. (Courtesy of SMU Dedman School of Law).



helpline, he received assistance from a local law firm that advised him on government small business loans and the CARES Act program, and helped him secure unemployment compensation.

The person who answered the food truck operator's initial call was Bach Norwood, a second-year student at SMU Dedman School of Law. Norwood says the most obvious yet meaningful part of the work has been providing relief to callers who are often distressed and fearful. "I am able to offer them information, guidance, and sometimes simply lend a sympathetic ear," Norwood says. "It means so much to people, just knowing that on the other end of the phone there is someone who

"This project is a wonderful example of how deeply committed SMU is to helping our students and to serving the beautiful city in which we are so fortunate to be located."

— Jennifer Collins, Dean of Dedman School of Law

"Even though there was not a lot I could do for them other than referring them for representation," Cos Mora says, "the family told me the simple act of listening and explaining the situation meant the world to them."

By David Buice