Empowering new lawyers to deliver high-quality, affordable legal services to clients of modest means.
The Justice Bridge Legal Access Center has been designed to address two core challenges confronting the American justice system:

1. Shrinking employment opportunities for recent graduates under existing law firm structures; and
2. The legal system’s growing inability to serve consumers of modest means who cannot afford high hourly rates but nonetheless make too much money to qualify for pro bono legal assistance.

In examining these issues, the developers of Justice Bridge concluded that one solution could efficiently address both problems: Connect new lawyers with clients of modest means.

To make this connection, Justice Bridge will give new lawyers the resources, education and mentorship necessary to provide quality legal services to people who are struggling to afford lawyers. Building upon “legal incubator” models developed by several law schools, Justice Bridge intends to take the training and support services offered by such programs to the next level.

By educating solo- and small-practice attorneys under the guidance of experienced mentors, Justice Bridge will give these lawyers the same advantages shared by junior associates in large, established firms. Justice Bridge is also building relationships with top law firms, retired justices and former senior partners, legal service organizations, and various affinity and membership-based community groups to help provide compassionate and professional representation to those with previously unmet legal needs.

A long-term imperative of Justice Bridge is fiscal independence. As a non-profit incubator — not a law firm — the program will depend on its community partners and affiliate attorneys to contribute to the long-term sustainability of the program. Attorneys share expenses with Justice Bridge to cover the costs of furnished office space and resources.

Justice Bridge will need support to bring equal justice to the clients of modest means and new employment opportunities to law school graduates. The center is intent on developing economic self-sufficiency, but for now it must seek supplemental funds to make Justice Bridge an integral and vital partner in the Boston and South Coast legal community.

Grants
The center will seek grants and legal-services contracts from non-profit foundations, particularly affinity organizations and groups dedicated to equal justice. Vouchers may also be contributed to support the incubator’s discounted fee structure.

Law-Firm Sponsored Fellowships
The center is asking firms to sponsor the initial classes of Justice Bridge lawyers by providing them with start-up grants and funds to provide pro bono legal services to those clients who cannot afford the rates charged by the incubator. These sponsorships will cover the costs of office space, resources and professional liability insurance.
BUILDING LAWYERS

More Than a Job

The mentors in Justice Bridge train new lawyers so they are not only able to take charge of a case, but also ultimately capable of running an independent practice. As part of the initial application process, Justice Bridge attorneys must submit a business plan outlining their legal practice goals. These attorneys then develop and refine their business plans as they participate in the program. Attorneys who complete a two-year term in the Justice Bridge program will then advance into the workforce with a competitive edge crucial for success in today’s legal marketplace.

BRIDGING THE EMPLOYMENT GAP

In addition to building better lawyers, Justice Bridge will help to ensure that law school graduates are able to use their degrees to help the people who are struggling to access justice. With only 54.9 percent of graduates from ABA-accredited schools able to find employment within nine months of graduation, a large segment of law graduates are migrating to other professions. Poor job prospects have also led to a reduction in law school applicants, leading more would-be attorneys away from the profession and leaving more working-class people to represent themselves.

THE JUSTICE GAP

Even before the recent economic downturn, people of modest means have been struggling to access high-quality, affordable legal services. Many people who cannot afford to pay market rates for a Boston attorney also earn too much money to qualify for pro bono (free) assistance. These people have fallen into a “Justice Gap” where they are forced to represent themselves and forego the legal advice and assistance they need.

In 2011, the World Justice Project ranked the United States 11th out of 11 high-income countries in providing access to justice. This year the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts noted a growing trend of self-representation in the Commonwealth’s trial courts, with 75 percent of parties in both the Housing Court and the Family and Probate Court appearing on a pro se basis (see chart).

“Equal justice under law… it is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of the ends for which our entire legal system exists… it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status.”

— U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, Jr.

THE EMPLOYMENT GAP

Slow economic recovery and shifting dynamics in the large-firm business model have left fewer jobs for new attorneys. According to recent employment statistics, only 54.9 percent of graduates from law schools accredited by the American Bar Association found full-time legal work within nine months of commencement. These graduates are often burdened with substantial student loan debt, a factor that leads them to seek work in non-legal professions.

Justice Bridge will provide new graduates with the resources, mentoring and client referrals necessary to help them become full-time lawyers in solo or small practices that they develop. Unlike most lawyers who “hang out a shingle” directly out of law school, Justice Bridge attorneys will have the chance to develop their skills within a community of other new lawyers in addition to retired judges and experienced practitioners.
Justice Bridge is pioneering a first-of-its-kind program in New England. The incubator is a non-profit organization that will provide office space, resources and client referrals to new attorneys to help meet two objectives:

1. Provide low-bono (reduced-fee) service, scaled to the income of clients struggling to access legal services and pro bono services to those who qualify but are struggling to find available attorneys at other legal aid organizations.

2. Mentor and train new attorneys to give them a competitive edge in the job market or skilled enough to manage their own practices when they leave the incubator.

Justice Bridge is building relationships and working with the legal services community, pro bono service organizations, anti-poverty community organizations, main street bar associations, regional bar associations, Boston bar associations and public librarian groups to determine how best to deliver legal services.

Justice Bridge is a not-for-profit legal incubator seeking to provide access to justice by ensuring the strategic and capable delivery of legal services. With these goals in mind, Justice Bridge is developing an economically self-sufficient legal center to serve poor and modest-means clients and a resource hub to serve the Boston legal community.