University and local officials celebrate Justice Bridge Legal Center in downtown New Bedford

NEW BEDFORD — Residents of limited means can now afford to consult lawyers for various cases thanks to the expansion of the Justice Bridge incubator to New Bedford.

UMass Law and local leaders participated in a ribbon cutting ceremony earlier this week at the 257-259 Union St. legal center made possible by a three-year $225,000 grant from the Bristol County Savings Bank.

“We live in a state where 85 percent of the people who lose their homes to foreclosure, their apartments to eviction and their children to custody battles, don’t have lawyers,” said Mary Lu Bilek, the law school dean. “Justice Bridge provides lawyers to those people to help them problem solve, to help them stabilize their lives, making it more likely for our clients and their families to be contributing members to society.”

Started in Boston in August 2014, the Justice Bridge law practice incubator expanded to New Bedford this summer. It takes walk-in clients, has seven attorneys (mostly UMass Law graduates) and has already handled 100 cases.
One of the first law practice incubators of its kind in the country, it aims to confront unmet civic legal needs, provide mentoring and employment for new attorneys, create a new financial model for law practices, and refine the law school curriculum.

It is an important program that meets a community need and helps law school graduates explore opportunities in serving the public, said Len Zandrow, executive director of the Justice Bridge Legal Center.

A 2014 graduate of UMass Law, Marcus Ferro is an attorney at the local office. He said he likes to “provide modest means clients the opportunity to have access to justice.” Often, low income people don’t qualify for legal aid and go unrepresented in court. Justice Bridge helps them get legal services for a modest fee, he said.

“This program hits a number of sweet spots” and is “a win-win” for a city where there is a pressing need for free legal services and a law school with new graduates looking to learn the craft, said Mayor Jon Mitchell, who commended the law school for pushing for this program at a time of budgetary constraints.

Justice Bridge is currently processing cases in New Bedford, Fall River and Taunton ranging from housing and family court matters to bankruptcy and consumer cases, according to a news release from UMass Dartmouth.

Justice Bridge supports 14 attorneys (seven based in Boston, and seven in New Bedford), in addition to 42 legal mentors with more than 30 years of experience on average.

“There’s only two in the state so it speaks highly for New Bedford,” said John Markey, Jr., a local attorney and a Justice Bridge mentor. “I credit the university for making it happen here where we have a working population that cannot afford legal services.”

Rep. Steven Howitt, R-Seekonk, who attended the reception, said Justice Bridge is a wonderful opportunity in the region.

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