

# Board of Commissioners of Cook County Chicago-Cook County Violence Against Women Task Force Hearing

Presented by Governors State University Legal Clinic

Dr. Phyllis West, Founding Director

May 6, 2026

# History of the Legal Clinic

Social Justice Initiative – A vision of Former President Cheryl Green

Current President – Dr. Joyce Ester from Phoenix, Illinois

## Legal Clinic

Opened June 10, 2023 – Operated out of GovState's Library

September 2024 – Moved into a Social Justice Initiative Building

## **Lead Attorneys**

Aaron McLeod

Robert Sharp

## **Pro Bono Attorneys**

Michael Smith

Moyambo Mbanza

Leon Huddleston

Staff: Five Social Work/Paralegal Interns and two Computer  
Science Work-Study Students



## Areas of Service

- Address legal service gaps throughout the Southland region, covering Suburban Cook, Will, and Kankakee Counties.
- Served hundreds of community members on legal matters such as
  - **Family law (2)**
  - Housing
  - Immigration
  - **Expungement and Sealing (1)**

# Family Law Cases

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Divorce

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Orders of protection – Domestic violence, dating violence

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Mental health and well-being of relatives

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Child custody

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Child support

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Guardianship

# Family Law and Violence Against Women

## What do we see?

- Physical, mental, psychological, and financial abuse
- Severe anxiety
- Constant tears
- Fear of teen or adult children, seeking to understand laws on hospitalization
- Dating violence – women in their 20's BDSM cases, sexual abuse
- Fear of leaving home due to safety concerns of older children

# Legal Clinic Services Response

CMASA

DV Think Tank  
Meetings  
2025

# Case Management, Advocacy, and Special Accommodations (CMASA)

August 2025 - Pilot of CMASA

- CMASA is an integrated service approach designed for clients who cannot complete legal forms independently due to systemic and/or psycho-social barriers.
- Social work staff and interns collaborate closely with attorneys to provide one-on-one assistance and connect clients to targeted community referrals.
- This ensures that clients filing pro se are not left to navigate the legal system alone.

# Convened a DV Think Tank Meeting at GSU

## FEBRUARY 11, 2025

### Attendees

Dr. Phyllis West, Director GovState Social Justice Initiative

Dr. Vickii Coffey, Department of Social Work (Retired)

Dr. Renee Garbe, BSW Coordinator, Department of Social Work

Joyce Coffee, Executive Director -Family Rescue

Jennifer Gabrenya, Chief Executive Officer -Anew)

Leslie Landis (Retired Domestic Violence Court Administrator)

# DV Think Tank Goals:

1. Foster collaboration around DV needs in the Southland.
2. Share updates on policy and funding.
3. Address resource gaps at Markham and 555 W. Harrison Courthouses.
4. Identify legal service gaps and partnership opportunities.

# DV THINK TANK Wishlist

**Intentional Collaboration:** To ensure services are coordinated, non-duplicative, and maximally effective.

**Warm Handoff Process:** Develop a structured process to ensure smooth referrals and service continuity between SJI and DV organizations.

**Legal Support:** Increase the number of court advocates dedicated to DV/Interpersonal Violence cases.

**Survivor-Focused Services:** Expand advocacy presence at courthouses and other key locations to better meet rising demand.

**DV Course Development:** GovState Department of Social Work to develop a specialized DV curriculum. This initiative aims to foster long-term stability for survivors and strengthen the pipeline of trained professionals dedicated to DV advocacy and support.

**Internship & Training:** Provide structured 40-hour DV advocacy training for social work students, with internship placements at partner organizations.

# Recommendations and Needs for Cook County Suburbs

1

Build through a public health lens

2

Prioritize the Cook County Suburbs and Value the Unique Needs

3

Establish an Alliance – Include the voices of survivors

# A Public Health Lens

Looks at:

Root causes

Social conditions

Prevention strategies

Community-wide  
solutions and protective  
factors

Examples of  
contributing factors:

- Poverty, substance  
abuse, social isolation,  
exposure to violence in  
childhood, lack of  
educational opportunity

# A Public Health Lens

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- **Violence Prevention Table**

Prevention Level	Focus	Violence Example
Primary	Prevent violence before it occurs	Anti-bullying education
Secondary	Detect and respond early	Domestic violence screening
Tertiary	Reduce long-term effects	Trauma therapy for survivors

# Prioritize Cook County Suburbs

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Unique and structurally different than Chicago

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Implement funding for the education of healthy relationships and healthy families in various community spaces (churches, schools)

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Increase access to child visitation services/centers within communities impacted by violence

Establish an Alliance – Include the voices of survivors



COORDINATION OF SERVICES  
AND RESOURCES



DESIGN PROTECTIVE SYSTEMS  
FOR THE SOUTHLAND