

Introducing the Federal Civil Rights Legal Clinic in Tacoma

The Federal Civil Rights Legal Clinic was founded in 2006 in Seattle. The origins of the Clinic date back to 2003, when a taskforce for the Federal Bar Association for the Western District of Washington studied the availability of legal services for low-income civil litigants in this District. The taskforce identified several gaps in legal services and determined how best to address them. One such gap was the lack of a designated resource to assist pro se litigants with federal legal questions. The taskforce proposed that the FBA-WDWA establish a periodic federal legal clinic to assist this population with their unmet legal needs. Founding attorney Tracy Morris was volunteering at the King County Bar Association's Neighborhood Legal Clinic and saw a need for assisting clients with federal issues. She worked closely with the FBA-WDWA, KCBA, and our federal judges, all who strongly supported a federal legal clinic, and in 2006, under her direction, and with the help of six dedicated volunteer attorneys, the Federal Civil Rights Legal Clinic was launched.

Once the Seattle Clinic got up and running on a once a month basis, the demand was so great that waiting lists for appointments were getting longer and longer. Tracy expanded the clinic and the federal judges offered space in the U.S. District Courthouse. Volunteer lawyers who practiced regularly in federal courts spent 30 minutes with each client. Boxes with forms and packets of information on various federally focused topics were available to pass out to clients to take home and review. Clients often returned regularly to keep their cases moving along or to allow the news that they did not have a case to fully sink in.

Because of the popularity of the Clinic in Seattle, Tracy determined to start a second Clinic in Tacoma. The federal judges were quite receptive and the Clerk's Office gave the Clinic two small offices: one for the clinic administrator and the other for client conferences. The first Tacoma Clinic was held in January 2014 and continues to be held on the first Thursday of each month, staffed by a volunteer **legal assistant** and a volunteer lawyer. Since COVID and the closure of the federal courthouse, the Clinics have all been conducted over the phone.

A continuing challenge for the Tacoma Clinic has been screening calls of prospective clients and making appointments. The Clinic partnered with Volunteer Legal Services initially and then TacomaProBono for the limited purpose of screening and scheduling clients, with limited success. That partnership ended in January 2021. Thanks to the dedication of legal assistants and lawyers, and continued

support from the bench and the bar, a new intake system was established in March. The screening and scheduling coordination is now serviced by a retired clerk of the U.S. District Court who is very knowledgeable about assisting callers with federal issues.

A typical clinic day starts at noon and ends at 2:00 pm with four clients at 30 minutes each. Some people have ongoing pro se cases and need help with the next pleading or understanding a judicial order and complying with the court's direction. Other people have questions about an experience that felt like racial discrimination in their work place. Materials are available to explain the process of filing with the Washington State Human Rights Commission and/or the EEOC. Another popular topic is violation of civil rights such as police misconduct or discriminatory conduct by a landlord. The volunteer lawyer will give information and advice and may refer the client to other entities such as the Tacoma-Pierce County Bar Association Lawyer Referral Service.

The expressions of gratitude by the clients for this Clinic keeps all involved committed. Tracy likes to say that the only way you leave this volunteer position is when you retire from your legal practice. It is that rewarding. One favorite story is the man who came every month to the **Seattle** Clinic for help with the next step in his federal lawsuit. He would make his appointment for next month at the conclusion of his current appointment. **Finally**, when he received his reminder call for his next appointment, **he** replied that he had just had mediation and got everything he asked for so he didn't need another appointment.

The Clinic welcomes all and although needs some information for insurance purposes, there are no requirements for low income or other qualifications except the need for help with a federal issue. Additional volunteer attorneys are welcome and once the federal courthouse fully reopens, it will return to the courthouse.



Tracy Morris, Esq., is the founder and Executive Director of the Federal Bar Association of the Western District of Washington's Federal Civil Rights Clinic, with offices in Seattle and Tacoma, Washington. She can be reached at morrstracy@seattleu.edu



Paula Olson is a solo practitioner in Tacoma. Her practice focuses on criminal law, torts and federal and state criminal defense.



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