Robin Sassi graduated from California Western School of Law in 2010 and is trying to make it as a solo practitioner. The business and real estate lawyer is not alone in her endeavor. She is one of eight young attorneys who are part of California Western’s new solo incubator program in San Diego.

“It feels like I’m back in law school all over again,” she said. “I definitely feel like I’m learning. I’m constantly confronted with new situations, and it’s accelerating my solo practice because of the referrals and the experience that I’m getting.”

California Western’s program, The Access to Law Initiative (ALI), provides new attorneys with office space, a personal mentor, training from organizations such as legal aid, and networking resources. In return, the lawyers agree to do 100 hours of pro bono and public service work during a 19-month period.

“The idea [of this program] is to accomplish two major purposes: serving the underserved communities as far as access to law, and also to have the law school play a role in supporting alumni who want to start a solo practice and are community-minded,” said Bob Seibel, director of the program and a visiting professor at California Western.

Seibel, who is a faculty member at City University of New York School of Law, modeled ALI after the Community Resource Legal Network at CUNY School of Law, where his colleague Fred Rooney developed the first incubator for attorneys in 2007. The project is designed to bring free or low-cost legal services to areas of the community that do not have access to those needs, while simultaneously supporting graduates who want to start a solo or small firm practice or participate in a non-profit organization.

Seibel said the model for the incubator program is revolutionary and believes it will change the way lawyers interact with clients and people in their communities.

“Hopefully it’s going to have an impact on the public perception of lawyers,” Seibel said. “When people think of lawyers, they think of the big-firm rich guys. There is plenty of work for lawyers; you just can’t always charge $300-plus an hour, and you shouldn’t. People need lawyers, and once they meet people like these attorneys, they are going to think very different of them.”

California Western’s program has been so successful that it is doubling its size by adding a second location with up to eight more attorneys. When the second location opens in January, the school will have the first incubator in the country with two locations.

The school is just one of a handful of schools instituting incubator programs. Rooney also collaborated with Thomas Jefferson School of Law’s professor Luz Herrera to create a similar program for its alumni, which opened Nov. 1 at the Family Justice Center Alliance in San Diego.

“The philosophy we all have is that there’s a large number of people who need legal services but don’t think they can get legal services,” said Lily McCoy, director of the Solo Practice Concentration and Lawyer Incubator Program at Thomas
Jefferson. “I think the legal market is just inefficient. Lawyers haven’t figured out how to tap that market, how to advertise and let people know that there are lawyers who are willing to charge rates that are on a sliding scale.”

The University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law and The University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law opened incubator programs to its graduates in 2011. This year, along with the two schools in San Diego, Chicago-Kent College of Law at Illinois Institute of Technology and Pace University School of Law debuted incubator programs. The newest name on the list is Cleveland State University — Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, which recently announced it is creating a solo practice incubator to support entrepreneurial graduates scheduled to open in 2013.

“Some people in the profession feel it’s too dangerous for new grads to start their own firms. Others say, ‘Hey I did it and I was wonderfully successful!’” McCoy said. “It all comes down to how you approach it — if you start your own firm in a way that’s conservative and careful, and you follow best practices and you get mentors, you can get a great practice up and running and be successful.”

The incubator support system can help smooth an experience that could otherwise be intimidating.

“One of the most beneficial things for me is that there’s eight of us in this together, so there’s a lot of collaboration and bouncing ideas off of each other,” said Jake Walton, one of the attorneys in the California Western program whose practice is focused on personal injury and consumer law. “I think a lot of people who are starting up solo practices are completely on their own, they don’t have interaction with other people.”

All the participants are focusing their practices in different areas, which cover everything from estate planning to criminal to business matters or personal injury.

Tammy Sumontha, another participant, said being surrounded by attorneys with different specialties helps.

“I practice mainly immigration, and there’s a lot of crossover between immigration and criminal,” Sumontha said. “And what happens is we can work together because one of the attorneys here practices criminal. Most of my clients do have criminal issues, so we refer to each other and sometimes we work together.”