FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 26, 2015

MacArthur Foundation Grant Supports Innovative Solutions for Making Essential Legal Help More Affordable and Accessible

New grant for CBF Justice Entrepreneurs Project (JEP) will enable development of replicable, market-based models that address growing gap in access to affordable legal help for middle class

Chicago, IL – The Chicago Bar Foundation (CBF) announced today a two-year, $400,000 grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to support the CBF’s Justice Entrepreneurs Project (JEP). The JEP is an incubator for recent law school graduates to start innovative, socially conscious law practices in the Chicago area that provide affordable services to low and moderate-income people, a vastly underserved client base. JEP lawyers are building practices that offer fixed fees and flexible representation options, maximize technology and attorney-client collaboration, and leverage existing but previously untapped referral networks.

“For too many low and moderate-income people in our communities, legal services are not realistically accessible or affordable in times of need,” said MacArthur Program Officer Jeff Ubois. “The partners and supporters the Chicago Bar Foundation has brought together and the early successes of the lawyers in the JEP program offer great potential to develop replicable, market-based models that can help to address more fully this gap in Chicago and across the country.”

Borrowing principles from successful incubators in the business and technology fields, the JEP provides training, resources, support, and a collaborative environment to help talented newer lawyers establish innovative practices serving the community. JEP lawyers serve people who typically have too much income to qualify for already overstretched free legal aid but do not have the means to afford legal services in the traditional legal market.

“The JEP is a cutting-edge response to a growing and very troublesome failure of the consumer market for legal services,” said Terri Mascherin, a Partner at Jenner & Block LLP and Chair of the JEP Steering Committee. “It marries proven principles from the business and tech startup fields with the latest innovations in legal practice to develop sustainable new models for delivering affordable legal services to low and moderate income people in need.”
JEP lawyers are building innovative law practices that:

1. Serve the legal needs of regular people.

2. Are client-centered and emphasize approachability, compassion and collaboration between clients and attorneys.

3. Make legal assistance more affordable and transparent by offering fixed fees and flexible representation options, and leveraging technology to increase efficiency.

The CBF contributed more than $250,000 in seed funding along with substantial staffing support to launch the JEP. An impressive array of partner organizations also make the program possible through pro bono and in-kind support worth hundreds of thousands more. Highlights of that in-kind support include the latest law practice management technology, individualized business development coaching from one of the premier consulting firms in that field, and a series of trainings from some of the top experts in the legal field.

“Thanks to a diverse network of top-notch partners and the dedicated and entrepreneurial participating lawyers, the JEP already is making an impact in meeting real community needs and establishing promising new models,” said Jesse Ruiz, a Partner at Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP and President of the CBF Board of Directors. “The grant from MacArthur will enable the CBF to complete the critical pilot phase of the program over the next two years, maximizing the impact and replicability of the JEP’s successful practice models throughout the country, while setting the program on the path to long-term sustainability here in Chicago.”

The grant was awarded through MacArthur’s Discovery Grants program, which funds exceptionally creative or innovative projects with high potential impact, but which do not fit into the Foundation’s existing programs and strategies.

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The Chicago Bar Foundation (CBF) brings Chicago’s legal community together to improve access to justice for people in need and make the legal system more fair and efficient for everyone. As the charitable arm of The Chicago Bar Association, the CBF’s work is made possible by the generous contributions of thousands of dedicated individuals, more than 200 law firms and corporations, and many other committed partners. More information on the CBF is available at: http://chicagobarfoundation.org/.

More information about the CBF’s JEP program can be found at http://chicagobarfoundation.org/jep/. People interested in seeking legal help from a JEP lawyer can go to http://jepchicago.org/.

More information about the MacArthur Foundation can be found at: http://www.macfound.org/about/.

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