

*“My son is sick from the mold in my apartment. I complained to my landlord, and now he is trying to evict us. Can you help me?”*

These are the kinds of questions Professor Dana Sisitsky and her students face 150 days of the year in the Community Law Project (CLP), offering free legal counseling to the most vulnerable members of the San Diego community. For many, these issues are too daunting to even think about. For CLP’s clients, the questions bring out fear and despair. For Professor Sisitsky, these challenges are a calling to do all that she can to give hope to each individual who shows up at a CLP clinic, to help them see that their problems do have solutions, and to give them the power to solve them. “Just the other day, I was sitting with a client pulling up bus schedules,” providing much more than legal advice, because, she says, “Empowerment is giving people the tools and the knowledge to deal with their pressing situation themselves.”

As Executive Director of the Community Law Project for the last 15 years, Professor Sisitsky has empowered thousands of San Diego’s most vulnerable individuals and trained scores of aspiring law students who have participated in CLP’s clinical internship program. She is astonished at how much CLP has accomplished during her tenure, yet the core of her motivation remains

as humble as ever: “I like helping people,” she says. “I’ve always found it intrinsically rewarding.”

Professor Sisitsky always knew she wanted to go into community-based work. After receiving her B.A. in political science and Spanish from UC Berkeley, she joined Teach for America, where she saw up close the many connected struggles that make life harder for disadvantaged communities. “As a third-grade teacher in an underfunded school, I saw that this was just the tip of the iceberg,” she says. Wanting to have a broader impact, she enrolled at NYU School of Law, initially thinking she might go into education law. But what she’d seen in the classroom — families struggling with housing, food insecurity, and systemic disadvantages — pushed her toward a more holistic approach.

Her work with the Community Law Project has allowed her to fulfill that aspiration. CLP tackles a broad spectrum of legal issues, including housing disputes, employment injustices, immigration concerns, and family law matters. Professor Sisitsky honed the skills necessary to lead such efforts in Massachusetts at Greater Boston Legal Services and Merrimack Valley Law Services, where she worked with individuals unfamiliar with the legal system,



many of them immigrants and first-time legal participants. She learned firsthand how legal aid could be a vital tool in breaking cycles of hardship. When she moved to San Diego, she was immediately drawn to the legal clinic at First Lutheran Church, which also housed medical and dental clinics, and a social worker: “I knew how important it was to focus on interwoven issues.”

In 2010, Professor Sisitsky joined the California Western family and was named the Executive Director of CLP. What began as one clinic has expanded exponentially under her leadership. “It’s now ten times what it was,” she says. Clinics now have dedicated days, times, and locations — situated at multiple sites throughout San



Diego, ensuring accessibility for those in need. Professor Sisitsky is a champion of CLP's dual mission of serving the unmet needs of the community and training law students. In 2012, she introduced a classroom component to the program. Each term, students learn about the most common legal issues affecting the poor, receive guidance on applying that knowledge, and develop strategies to effectively provide counsel and support. The program strengthens their ability to translate legal knowledge into practical guidance.

"Many students come to California Western not knowing what field of law they want to practice. After participating in CLP, many ultimately pursue a career in public interest law," says Professor Sisitsky. CLP creates a symbiotic relationship between students, attorneys, and community members. As much as clients gain from legal advising, CLP students gain in skill, knowledge, and perspective. The clinic stretches student empathy, forcing them to grapple with their limitations. She recalls a recent client who spoke only Spanish, was unhoused, illiterate, with vision challenges, walking with a cane, and was a victim of sexual abuse. Professor

Sisitsky and the student intern sat with the client, trying to find one good option for her amidst "so many vulnerabilities." When the client left, she comforted the student as they both teared up and the two talked about accepting limitations. "It's painful, but it's part of the reality of this work — knowing that you can only do so much while still doing your best."

The dedication of CLP students and attorneys has earned deep trust throughout the community: "We're in schools, in churches, in community centers." Now in its 20th year, the program is better equipped than ever and more in demand than ever. Housing insecurity is a preeminent issue.

Despite recent rent control regulations, costs continue to rise and vulnerable tenants are still being taken advantage of. Requests from immigration organizations are on the rise as well. Yet, disturbingly, individuals with immigration issues are seen less frequently, often too frightened to seek counsel. There is a temptation to further expand, but Professor Sisitsky remains mindful that CLP must stay true to its dual mission of serving the community while training young advocates.

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One resource CLP can never get enough of is volunteer attorneys, who provide critical specialty legal advice within the clinics and mentor CLP students. Professor Sisitsky encourages California Western alumni to give of their time, if nothing else, emphasizing the impact of even a few hours of pro bono work. Many of CLP's volunteer attorneys are alumni who went through the program themselves. "So many share that CLP was one of the most influential things throughout their time in law school. That means so much to me."

One might think this work could lead to burnout, but after 24 years as a public interest attorney, including 15 years at California Western, Professor Sisitsky continues to find it deeply energizing. Seeing what CLP clients endure is a daily reminder to appreciate what she has. She notes that clients, despite immense hardship, often persevere because they keep their families at the center of their lives, inspiring her to do the same. "For so many of our clients, family is everything. They will do whatever it takes to help their loved ones," she says. With her husband, two children, and dog, Sisitsky makes sure to take time away for the simple joys that keep her grounded.

For all of her leadership, strategic thinking, and legal expertise, Professor Sisitsky remains, at heart, someone who prefers action over abstraction. "I'd rather be on the ground, doing what I can." That mindset has shaped CLP into what it is today: a place of empowerment, education, and advocacy that continues to transform lives, one person at a time.

## Off Campus with Professor Sisitsky

### WHAT ARE YOU READING?

I enjoy spending time outdoors and in nature, and I am a huge lover of animals. I keep thinking about a fascinating book I recently read, *Remarkably Bright Creatures*. It's a fictionalized story about an octopus with humanlike intelligence. It interweaves the natural world and animal world and shows how interdependent we are.

### WHAT ARE YOU LISTENING TO?

NPR. Classic rock — Eagles.  
Jason Mraz. Folk.

### WHAT HAVE YOU WATCHED RECENTLY THAT YOU'D RECOMMEND?

I thought the *Bob Dylan* movie, *A Complete Unknown*, was really good. *Wicked* was also a lot of fun — I really like musicals. *Saturday Night Live* is a staple in our household — it's always good to enjoy a laugh.

### WHAT DO YOU DO FOR FUN, RELAXATION, QUALITY TIME OFF CAMPUS?

Nature, hiking, camping. I've decided 2025 is my year of travel. I just went to Santa Fe with one of my closest friends. My family and I are going to Glacier National Park this summer. I love exploring new places.