

Human Rights At Home Blog

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A Student Perspective on Human Rights Advocacy

By Human Rights at Home Blog

The following is written by three Cornell who recently engaged in Human Rights Advocacy. Baldwin, Joseph and Matos are student members of Cornell Law School's Global Gender Justice Clinic.

Bringing Human Rights Home: Legislative Advocacy in Tompkins County, NY

By Josh Baldwin, Joanne Joseph and Carolyn Matos

On November 18, 2014, the Tompkins County Legislature unanimously passed a resolution declaring that freedom from domestic violence is a human right. Tompkins County became the fourteenth locality, and the first exclusively rural community, to pass such a resolution. The Global Gender Justice Clinic at Cornell Law School is proud to have achieved this goal.

As a clinic team, we were excited to work, together with the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County, Cornell Law School's Avon Global Center for Women and Justice, and Prof. Elizabeth Brundige on a project that brought human rights home. It was important for us to work on local human rights issues since there are still many human rights violations in the United States, though they often are not discussed in human rights terms. The Supreme Court decision of *Town of Castle Rock v. Gonzales*, where the Court held that the plaintiff did not have a constitutionally protected right to the enforcement of her restraining order, illustrated this point to us.

This semester, the team drafted the resolution along with a background paper discussing its context and importance. We also launched a petition to gather community support for our resolution and were able to collect more than 400 signatures. One of the most rewarding experiences this semester was working with a local legislator to improve the language of our draft in response to questions that she and her colleagues had raised.

Working with a local partner, the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County, an organization that provides services to survivors of domestic violence, was extremely beneficial and rewarding. The Advocacy Center provided great feedback on our drafts and invaluable assistance in reaching community members and helping us understand the complexity of the issues surrounding domestic violence. We partnered with them throughout Domestic Violence Awareness Month and participated in several community events, including screenings of the documentary *Telling Amy's Story* in a local cinema as well as at Cornell.

We encountered a few challenges this semester, but learning to overcome them was incredibly gratifying. One of the issues we grappled with was whether to refer in the resolution to "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence." This issue was discussed at length, and, with our Advocacy Center partners, we ultimately decided to use "domestic violence" and explain what it includes, because the term was broader, would cover more survivors, and would be more familiar to our local community.

Engaging in local advocacy was a sometimes difficult, but ultimately rewarding, experience. For example, we were pushed out of our comfort zone by tackling new media of advocacy, from being featured on a local radio talk show to writing a column in a local newspaper. We addressed the legislature, community members, and community stakeholders several times, which strengthened our public speaking and advocacy skills. We also improved our writing skills and our ability to work together as a cohesive team.

We will continue advocating for the passage of similar resolutions by the Ithaca Town Board, City of Ithaca Common Council, and Tompkins County Council of Governments, and we also hope to undertake future projects to address their implementation. This was one of the most rewarding experiences of our law school careers, and we are honored to have been part of a human rights clinic that addresses human rights within the United States.

http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/human_rights/2014/12/a-student-perspective-on-human-rights-advocacy.html

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