

Media Contact: Valerie Phillips
312/362-5039, vphillip@depaul.edu

IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 20, 2008

**STUDENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES HAVE A VIGOROUS ADVOCATE
AS DEPAUL LAUNCHES LEGAL CLINIC TO PROTECT THEIR RIGHTS**

Students with developmental disabilities will have a powerful advocate to champion their cause as the DePaul University College of Law opens its new Special Education Advocacy Clinic. The clinic will join the College of Law's seven existing clinical programs, which are all designed to serve the community while providing law students with the opportunity to learn the law while representing actual clients.

"The Special Education Advocacy Clinic will address the needs of children with developmental disabilities who may have otherwise never had a voice," said Glen Weissenberger, dean of the College of Law. "The most attractive component of this clinic and the law school's other clinical programs is that they serve as a rich resource for practical education for students while simultaneously benefiting the community at large."

A developmental disability is any condition that impedes a child's development. Most often such conditions are evident before a person reaches the age of 22. Examples of such developmental disabilities include mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy or specific learning disabilities.

The Special Education Advocacy Clinic will work to protect the educational rights of children with these types of developmental disabilities. It is funded in part by the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities through a \$123,000 Cultural Diversity at the Policy Table grant. The council is dedicated to leading change so that all people with developmental disabilities exercise their right to equal opportunity and freedom. The council's efforts are focused in such areas as education, employment, transportation, community living and health care.

(more)

In addition to promoting policies favorable to the educational needs of children with developmental disabilities, the Special Education Advocacy Clinic also will provide legal representation to financially distressed parents of these children. Among the clinic's central goals is increasing educational opportunities for law students in the area of special education law while facilitating the adoption of better practices to help shatter barriers often faced by culturally diverse children with developmental disabilities who live in underserved communities.

The clinic's clients will be represented by law students, under the supervision of a clinical law instructor. Among their responsibilities will be encouraging collaborations between school districts and parents as well as advocating at individual education plan meetings, mediation sessions and special education proceedings.

"There is a clear link between disabilities, poverty and minority status," said Nelly Aguilar the clinic's director. "Legal representation through the clinic will substantially impact the ability of our state's most vulnerable children to obtain a free and appropriate public education, as federal law mandates."

Aguilar, who conducts special education law trainings for families, professionals and students, has personal motivation for leading the clinic. The mother of a young son with a developmental disability, Aguilar was forced to sue a school district when her son was unlawfully displaced from a public school preschool program.

The Special Education Advocacy Clinic joins the College of Law's asylum/immigration, civil rights, criminal appeals, death penalty, family law and technology/intellectual property clinics as well as its new misdemeanor defense clinic. All follow a long DePaul tradition of education through service and community-based service learning.

Established in 1912, DePaul's College of Law is ranked among the top 100 law schools in the country by U.S. News & World Report. It enrolled 1,024 students for the 2007-2008 academic year, and boasts nearly 12,000 living alumni. Graduates of the College of Law include state and federal judges, municipal, county and state leaders and two generations of Chicago mayors.

