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W&M Law Students, Williamsburg Attorneys Collaborate for Voting Rights Project

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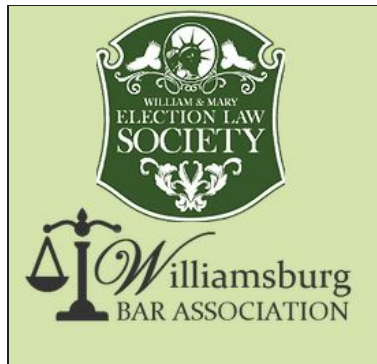
Students at William & Mary Law School have a chance to gain real-world experience while helping more citizens gain the opportunity to vote.

The Revive My Vote project, which launched earlier this month, helps those convicted of a nonviolent felony apply to have their voting rights reinstated. It is a joint outreach effort by the law school and the Williamsburg Bar Association.

Rebecca Green, law professor and co-director of the Election Law Programs, said the initiative got started when a local attorney reached out to her about statewide changes to streamline the restoration process. She took the idea to one of the school's election law fellows, Mark Listes, who has a scholarship to perform research as part of his time as a student.

"When he started describing his background and interests, this seemed like the perfect project for him to work on," Green said.

Listes worked with a local judge to build the infrastructure of the program, which included everything from recruiting student volunteers to figuring out a phone hotline system. He met with Green about every other week to discuss the next issue to tackle or troubleshoot, then would research a solution and report back.



To reach potential clients, they found organizations working with people affected by voter disenfranchisement, based on geography and demographics. The team sent emails and made follow-up phone calls.

Along the way, they became authorities on unexpected niche knowledge — like online phone bank tools — and learned what do differently in the next outreach effort. Green said she plans to add probation officers to a contact list because people on parole might be interested in having their rights restored once their term is up.

Green does not view the program as being specific to Williamsburg and its residents. Instead, she said research has indicated there is a large underserved population from Norfolk, Hampton and Newport News.

Although there are plans to spread the word farther soon, Green said the response has been steady since the program officially kicked off April 7.

Student volunteers man phones Monday and Wednesday between 6 and 8 p.m., but callers can leave a message at any time to be returned shortly. Students cannot practice law or give legal advice, but they can take down information from applicants and help them track down documents and court records that are public information.

"Oftentimes people don't have the resources to figure that system out and how to get those records, and where to go and who to go to — and law students are great at that sort of thing," Green said.

Listes said the application process — and especially rejection aspect — can be difficult to understand. By students taking the time to track down records that accompany an application, they can ensure it is in proper order for approval.

"It's as straightforward as trying to make sure the application is complete on the whole, rather than waiting to have someone accept it," he said.

The work is gratifying, he said, in that it allows law students to make a difference in someone's life while practically applying what they are learning in the classroom.

Green said the project also gives students the chance to become acclimated with the legal world, interacting with clerks, courts and practicing attorneys. Future lawyers see not only how their role models do their jobs, but the skills that are needed to accomplish tasks. They present their research to the attorney, who advises the client, but students are in on the process every step of the way.

To learn more about Revive My Vote, [visit their website](#).

