

## Elon Legal Services Program Gets \$1.2 Million Grant

By Administrator

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An Elon Law resource that has assisted thousands of women and children across Guilford and Alamance counties has been renewed for another two years through a \$1.2 million grant from the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission. The law school's Emergency Legal Services Program, a resource embedded within both counties' respective Family Justice Centers, aids victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and elder abuse by providing legal consultations and help with drafting complaints for restraining orders and child custody issues.

Legal assistance is only one part of the centers' "one-stop shop" comprehensive approach to addressing violence. Clients can access counseling, social services, and law enforcement with trained professionals better able to coordinate victim services by virtue of being under the same roof. Victim advocacy and court accompaniment are also available.

"These Family Justice Centers are like an oasis in the desert," said Margaret Dudley, an attorney who directs Elon Law's Emergency Legal Services Program in both counties. "People can come in here and get all kinds of help. It's given with compassion and it's given as quickly as possible."

Alamance County's Family Justice Center opened its doors in 2010 to assist victims of violence with resources available in the county's renovated Department of Social Services building on Martin Street in Burlington. Five years later, Guilford County launched its own Family Justice Center on Greene Street in downtown Greensboro. A location opened in High Point in 2018.

Both centers bring together law enforcement, medical, and social service professionals to coordinate access to vital services and information with a special focus on victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Elon Law established its legal services program in both centers in 2016 when the Governor's Crime Commission awarded the university an initial \$1.3 million startup grant. The commission's grants fund salaries and benefits for three intake attorneys, four contract attorneys, and an administrative assistant, plus various expenses related to professional development and office operation.

Since its founding, the Elon Law program has served more than 3,000 people across both

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counties.

“The Emergency Legal Services Program, under the leadership of Attorney Dudley, has transformed how victims of crime in our community access legal consultation and support,” said Catherine Johnson, executive director of the Guilford County Family Justice Center. “The Family Justice Center framework hinges on these types of partnerships and we look forward to our continued collaboration with Elon Law.”

The Emergency Legal Services Program has likewise involved contributions from Elon Law students who have completed externships and residencies-in-practice under Dudley’s supervision.

Local judges praised the Family Justice Center, and the Emergency Legal Services Program, for what they described as “an asset to the community” and an “invaluable tool.”

The Hon. Teresa Vincent, chief judge of the North Carolina District Court in Guilford County, said many people, absent a lawyer, don’t recognize what the law requires for courts to grant certain protective orders. And without presenting specific sets of facts, judges can only do so much.

That’s what makes the Emergency Legal Services Problem such an important component to the overall program, she said.

“I know what life was like (for victims seeking help) without a Family Justice Center, so it’s easy to see the value because I see where we are now,” Vincent said. “I think about those who lost their lives in years past due to domestic violence and perhaps individuals who came to the courthouse to gain protection they felt like they needed but were unsuccessful. I think about what may have happened if we had a Family Justice Center in place at that time.

“When you think about it, who wouldn’t want to support this kind of endeavor? The work they do is wonderful work and it’s making a difference in the lives of people.”