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Josh Haner/The New York Times

Fatai O. Lawal, Gabriel R. Munson and Jay Kim are part of an incubator program for new lawyers hoping to open practices.

By JONATHAN D. GLATER

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When Gabriel R. Munson graduated from law school in 2003, his goal was to have his own practice someday, modeling himself after Atticus Finch, the small-town lawyer in Harper Lee's classic "To Kill a Mockingbird."

"He's pretty much the idea of what a great lawyer should be, and a good human being," Mr. Munson said. "Courage, compassion, rationality — he's what kind of inspires me and makes me strive to be a better lawyer."

But when Mr. Munson set out on his own last spring, after leaving his first job with the [Legal Aid Society](#), he quickly realized that whatever he knew about law would not help him much in private practice, which is essentially running a small business.

"It's a totally different mind-set," said Mr. Munson, 42. "You're thinking, how do I generate a salary? Should I hire an employee? How do I go about doing that?"

Mr. Munson is getting answers to those questions through a so-called incubator program established by his alma mater, the City University of New York School of Law, for its graduates.

The program aims to help and encourage new lawyers to go into private practice on their own in communities where there are few lawyers, and where people cannot afford to pay hundreds of dollars per hour for legal service. For 18 months, it offers training by experienced practitioners in all matters of building a law practice: drumming up business, keeping accurate books, and hiring and firing.

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development skills, but it's all done with the goal of having them set up practices where access to justice is extremely limited," said Fred Rooney, director of external relations at CUNY School of Law and one of the creators of the incubator. "That's most of the city."

The effort is financed by CUNY and with money from the state. Participants pay a low monthly rent for office space and supplies on Fifth Avenue, at 27th Street, in the office of Laura Gentile, a CUNY law graduate who has a small firm. She is also one of the teachers in the program.

"I will teach them everything from how to analyze and select a malpractice policy, to how to manage their money so they never fall off the edge of doom," Ms. Gentile said. She also tries to teach about coping with uncertainty, which she said was a critical real-world skill.

"Sometimes you realize that in two months you're not going to have the rent," Ms. Gentile said. "It can be really scary, but the solution does come."

Six lawyers are in the program now, with space for two more. Mr. Rooney said he plans to expand the initiative to 12 lawyers next year.

Fatai O. Lawal, a Nigerian lawyer who has passed the New York bar and who worked at CUNY's law school as a security guard after coming to the United States, is one of this year's participants. Mr. Lawal said he already had several clients with [immigration](#) matters, so far mostly citizenship applications.

"Before I heard about this incubator program, I was working from home," said Mr. Lawal, who is building his practice while also working for the city's Correction Department as a legal coordinator with inmates at [Rikers Island](#). "This is a great opportunity to get an office in Manhattan, for a cheaper price."

Mr. Lawal said he tried to keep his fees low, adding that he charged one financially strapped family \$250 for helping with an application to move additional family members to the United States. Another lawyer had wanted \$1,000, he said.

The CUNY program raises a question that law schools are increasingly grappling with: Why are their students, after three years of intellectually demanding training, not ready to practice as soon as they pass a bar exam?

"Law schools have an aspiration to be a part of an academic research community," not trade schools focused on teaching practical skills, said Deborah L. Rhode, a law professor and the director of the Center on Ethics at Stanford, who has written about access to legal representation in the United States.

Even though students may participate in clinical programs in which they represent real clients, Professor Rhode said, "We don't teach practice management skills, we don't teach human resources, we don't teach lots of what students need to run an effective practice."

Mr. Rooney said he wanted to start the program in part because of his own painful learning experience in 1987, when he first hung out his shingle because the pay in his public-sector job was too low to support his young family.

Without mentors or teachers, Mr. Rooney recalled that he had to learn how to find clients and how to make and handle money. "With a lot of hard work and sacrifice and sweat equity and you name it, we created an economically viable practice," he said, "but I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."



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