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## Boosting Legal Assistance to Skid Row

By Anat Rubin

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Advocates for the poor and homeless hope to boost legal assistance in Skid Row through an all-day educational program for lawyers and activists.

Event organizer Becky Dennison of the Los Angeles Community Action Network said there is a misperception that "downtown legal organizations are contributing to the solutions on Skid Row. But the reality on the ground is legal services are extremely limited when it comes to evictions, civil rights violations and criminal defense, which in this era of gentrification are the three biggest needs."

Panelists at the Friday event will include attorneys and Skid Row residents.

"We want to create a model of working from within the community," Dennison said. "To raise awareness about the level and intensity of human rights abuses over the past year, and to increase meaningful and accessible legal resources on an ongoing basis."

More than 100 private and public interest lawyers and academics are expected to attend the event, which advocates have named a "Human Rights Convening."

"It's always important to situate what's going on locally in the context of human rights and civil rights," said UCLA Law professor Gary Blasi, who has done extensive work with downtown homeless

advocates.

"It's important for lawyers in particular to think about the legal violations going on in the context of human rights. Rights that exist independent of whether our courts say they're enforceable."

Blasi's students at UCLA researched public documents in connection with recent policing efforts in the area. They found that officers who were brought into Skid Row to crack down on serious crime issue more than 1,000 citations each month for minor infractions such as jaywalking and littering - citations that go to warrant when a homeless person can't pay the hefty fine.

Attorney Carol Sobel will speak to participants about civil rights issues related to policing in Skid Row.

Another focus of the conference will be housing issues.

Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles attorney Barbara Schultz has been working on Skid Row housing issues for five years. Recently, she helped push the city to preserve residency hotels, and stopped the landlords of those hotels from shuffling residents every 28 days to keep them from acquiring tenant protections.

But laws and court victories have not stopped the acceleration of mass evictions and illegal lockouts downtown.

Hard-won protections, Schultz said, don't mean much without lawyers.

"People need representation," Schultz said. "As long as landlords can act as if these laws don't exist, tenants need help enforcing them."

The Inner City Law Center is the only legal organization housed in Skid Row. But with limited resources, its five attorneys haven't been able to focus much of their work on representing downtown residents.

"We want to focus other people on the needs down here," said director of litigation Betsy Handler. "People don't want to know what's happening here. They don't want to know what's happening to this part of the population."

Blasi hopes attorneys walk away with a different vocabulary for what's happening on Skid Row.

"You can look at the needs of homeless people by helping them deal with citations, but if you step back and look at the situation like someone from another country might, you would ask why we are talking about helping people with citations instead of dealing with the gross abuses of human rights that have ensnared thousands of people on Skid Row."

The event, sponsored by a dozen organizations and firms, including McNicholas & McNicholas and Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, will take place at 9 a.m. at the Central City Church of the Nazarene at 419 East 6th St., Los Angeles.