More than 80 percent of Missouri’s low-income citizens are without access to necessary legal services. To address this pressing concern and similar needs as to criminal representation, the School of Law hosted a recent conference on “Access to Equal Justice: A Dialogue Between the University and the Community to Improve the Delivery of Legal Services and Justice in Our Region.”

More than 200 civil and criminal attorneys, community leaders, government officials, judges, and law school faculty, staff, and students from Missouri and Illinois convened at Anheuser-Busch Hall to discuss ways to improve access to justice. The conference, chaired by Karen Tokarz, professor of law and director of clinical education, highlighted ideas for innovative law school teaching, collaborative university/community projects, pro bono lawyer networks, and legal Internet services.

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Dean Hill Rivkin

Co-sponsored by the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), the conference was the largest of several held across the country in the past year, part of an AALS project to improve universal access to the legal system.

“The response to this conference was stunning,” says Tokarz. “Although we initially set a limit of 100 participants, we quickly surpassed that number and quit counting after 200. The conference provided a unique opportunity for faculty, students, and alumni from several law schools in the region to connect and strategize with the community, the bench, and the bar about our shared mission to provide access to justice.”

Dean Hill Rivkin, director of the AALS Equal Justice Project and a professor of law at the University of Tennessee College of Law, says, “Law schools have an important role to play in helping to solve the problems of the poor—from providing theory and data to educating the next generation of lawyers who will confront these complex issues. In attending AALS conferences across the country this year, I have learned that the most successful work—in terms of expanding the important day-to-day responses to the legal needs of the poor—has been in communities like St. Louis where law faculty are integrally involved with the justice and grass roots communities.”

Among the conference presenters were Dianne Taylor, JD ’73, executive director of Legal Services of Eastern Missouri and member of the steering committee for the Missouri Statewide Legal Services System; Sandra Moore, JD ’79, president of Urban Strategies, a division of McCormack Baron, a national housing and urban development firm based in St. Louis; Jacqueline Kuitnik-Bauder, JD/MSW ’97, director of the St. Louis Children’s Legal Alliance; and then-United States Attorney Audrey Fleissig, JD ’80.

In addition to Tokarz and Aiken, law school faculty and staff participating in the conference included Susan Appleton, associate dean of faculty and the Lemma Barkeloo & Phoebe Couzins Professor of Law; Professor Peter Joy, director of the Criminal Justice Clinic; Bethany Johnson, clinical program coordinator; C.J. Larkin, staff attorney for the Civil Justice Clinic; Maxine Lipeles, professor of law, professor of engineering, and director of the School of Law’s Interdisciplinary Environmental Clinic; Dorie Bertram, director of public services for the law library; Hyla Bondareff, research services librarian; and, Katrina Stierholz, access services librarian.