



Helping Disadvantaged Students Become Lawyers

As a blind black lawyer, Praveena Sukhraj has overcome enormous challenges. The odds are stacked against disadvantaged law students at South African universities. While all must complete their studies at established law firms writing legal memorandums, disadvantaged scholars are often turned away because firms are unwilling to sponsor them. In addition, thousands of black lawyers complete their studies only to struggle with the funding required to study for the bar exam.

To promote better equity and access, USAID supports the Placement Scheme, a program to sponsor and place law candidates in private firms, state attorney offices and law clinics while they study for the bar exam. After the program was initially advertised, more than 3,000 people — 40 percent of them women — applied for the 240 slots.

Were it not for this initiative, Praveena and 379 fellow disadvantaged black lawyers would likely not be practicing law today. Even with 19 distinctions on her record, countless law firms had cited Praveena's handicap to deny her placement. She decided to risk taking the bar exam without the practical law firm experience, but she would need to support herself during six months of intense study — and an assistant to read for her. A special computer, voice software and a Braille printer and paper added to the costs.



Photo: USAID/Reverie Zurba

These candidates are among those participating in the Placement Scheme.

USAID is working with the Black Lawyers' Association and five well-known South African legal institutions to tap into their vast networks throughout the country to sponsor candidates, monitor their progress and help relieve their financial burdens. The Placement Scheme sponsored training for 105 candidate lawyers at the School for Legal Practice and provided a year of funding while the candidates studied at legal firms. An additional 139 candidates were sponsored while studying for the bar exam.

Praveena says that without support from USAID's Placement Scheme, "I'd never have come out of study on equal footing with everyone else."

Like many of the program's beneficiaries, Praveena passed the bar exam with honors. At just 24, Praveena practices administrative law, teaches commercial law at her alma mater and is earning her Ph.D. in public policy. She hopes to continue teaching and be in Parliament drafting legislation in ten years' time. Praveena says that without support from USAID's Placement Scheme, "I'd never have come out of study on equal footing with everyone else."

Over three years, the Placement Scheme has significantly increased the numbers of previously disadvantaged law graduates practicing in South Africa. For the first time, candidate law graduates from rural areas were targeted for support. Now practicing lawyers, many contribute pro bono legal services to their communities through law clinics and their own practices.

Success Story

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