



Able to Make  
a Difference



On Iowa City's Melrose Avenue, not far down the street from the modern architectural lines of the Boyd Law Building, sits an old two-story house in need of a fresh coat of paint.

It may be ever so humble, but, for at least one University of Iowa professor, it's also home to something ever so precious: the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center. Past the unassuming exterior of the center's office building works a team of professionals, whose combined expertise may be invaluable to breaking down barriers that impede the employment and lifestyle of people with disabilities across the country.

**"To me, it's a little jewel in the law school's crown," says the center's director, Peter Blanck.**

The UI professor of law, psychology, and public health says the center has evolved from when he started it mainly as a research center in 1993. But during the last couple of years, the center has been extremely successful in receiving federal, state, and private grants. Blanck says his "primary approach is that, if a project is worth doing, it's also worth approaching from a research and policy perspective that can be both rigorous and relevant."

The center now comprises five offices—at the College of Law; the Melrose Avenue building; on the UI's Oakdale Campus; in Adel, Iowa; and in Washington, D.C. Blanck's College of Law colleagues, Leonard Sandler, James Schmeling, and David Klein, help manage the center in their respective roles of codirector, associate director, and director of technology. The center's executive director, Michael Morris, oversees the Washington, D.C., branch.

Blanck brings to the center an extensive background in disability law. He is a widely published author of some of the earliest and most comprehensive studies on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), has testified on the ADA before Congress, and is a member of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities.

Before coming to Iowa, Blanck was a senior fellow for the Annenberg Program, practiced law at the Washington, D.C., law firm of Covington & Burling, and had served as a law clerk to the late Hon. Carl McGowan of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Before that, he obtained his Ph.D. from Harvard and a law degree from Stanford, where he served as president of the *Stanford Law Review*.

Throughout his career, Blanck's guiding principle has been to facilitate research, discussion, and vision. "And then to get out of the way," Blanck is quick to add. "I can help provide direction and leadership, but then, we've hired some of the best people I know to collaborate on the research and writing projects."

Schmeling is one of those people. A 1999 graduate of the College of Law, Schmeling began working for the center that same year. He explains that the center focuses on research, service, and education—all with the goal of helping people with disabilities gain better employment, improve work conditions, and secure higher wages. Through policy research and analysis, and through technical assistance to government agencies and to private companies, the team at the center extends its efforts nationwide.

**Sandler notes that the center also gives Iowa taxpayers a great return. "We're educating Iowa's lawyers, as well as our citizens with disabilities, and developing and improving the lives of our fellow Hawkeyes," he says, mentioning an initiative called The Great Plains Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center, an organization that assists disabled workers from across the Midwest.**

In collaboration with the assistance center, the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center investigates and researches workers' questions about existing and pending disability legislation.

The Law, Health Policy & Disability Center also works with the new One-Stop Workforce Development Centers across the country. These places used to be called unemployment offices. The name change came hand-in-hand with the passage of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act, reflecting a change in orientation to one of greater inclusion of the disabled in public employment services. Through a grant from the Department of Labor, staff from the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center will help ensure that the Workforce Development Centers become accessible to the disabled.

The center also offers long-distance educational opportunities through web-based computer training courses. Web design, computer programming, and other information technology fields are up-and-coming areas of employment for the disabled,

In February of this past year, professor Peter Blanck, director of the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center, was a guest at the White House for the unveiling of the President's Freedom Initiative, a directive aimed at bringing the disabled into all aspects of American life.

according to Klein, director of technology. The center is completing a large project (funded by the U.S. Department of Education) examining corporate culture and disability at a large U.S. information technology company.

"There's a dramatic demand for trained IT workers," Klein says. "Research shows that the percentage of working-age individuals with disabilities in full- or part-time positions is substantially lower than the percentage of working-age people without a disability."

Through yet another \$1.5 million five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation, the center is studying ways to reduce the shortage of information technology workers by developing strategies for the employment of persons with disabilities. Some accounts have the unemployment rate for people with disabilities as high as 70 percent. Over the next five years, the center will work to identify factors helpful to the hiring, retention, and advancement of information technology workers with disabilities. Findings will be distributed to target audiences, such as employers, other researchers, and policymakers.

Blanck believes the recent expansion of the center to include a Washington, D.C., office offers great promise for future development of the center, in terms of research, service, and educational externship experiences for students from the law school and other parts of The University of Iowa. The center's new Washington, D.C., contingent of five is headed by Morris, who has worked as legal counsel to the Small Business Committee of the U.S. Senate and served on a Senate subcommittee on the handicapped. Morris's career in disability policy and advocacy reaches back more than 20 years.



There's also been no dearth of media attention directed at the Melrose house. The *New York Times*, the *Economist*, the *Wall Street Journal*, National Public Radio, and a score of television and radio news programs across the country have lauded the virtues of the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center.

**"There's nothing like it, that we're aware of, in the country, certainly not within a law school," Blanck says.**

**He's also quick to note that this "unique shop" would not exist but for the vision and support of N. William Hines, dean of the UI College of Law.**

**"The center reflects Dean Hines's belief in the interdisciplinary study of law, policy, and research," Blanck says.**

It is clear that the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center has brought the College of Law into the middle of the national dialogue on employment and quality-of-life issues facing people with disabilities.

What's next? Plans include developing a research, policy, and educational program at the Iowa City and Washington, D.C., offices. The program will give law students interested in policy research on disability issues the opportunity to work side by side with leading policymakers, legislators, and researchers. Beyond that, Blanck's vision includes ensuring the center continues to diversify the research, educational, and service opportunities available that may benefit Iowa and the nation—and perhaps getting Dean Hines to paint the house.

For more information about the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center, visit its web site at [www.its.uiowa.edu/law/index.htm](http://www.its.uiowa.edu/law/index.htm).



FULL HOUSE: Staff from the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center have brought the College of Law into the national limelight. From left to right: Pat Steele, James Schmeling, Peter Blanck, Ruth Kenton-Seick, Robert Dawson, Helen Schartz, Leonard Sandler, Kevin Schartz, and David Klein.

