A 33-year-old professor at Loyola University Chicago School of Law plans to launch a new program to fight health problems that afflict Chicago's poor.

Asked if health problems have afflicted the poor since Adam and Eve, Emily A. Benfer said, "Yeah, I guess so."

Now is the time to use the law to do something about it, Benfer asserted.

Her life story suggests that health problems among the poor may be in for a good fight.

Benfer has been hired by Loyola to start a legal clinic in 2011 called the Health Justice Project, part of the Beazley Institute for Health Law and Policy. The clinic will train doctors, nurses and others to watch for legal problems that harm the health of the poor and report those problems to Loyola law school.

Students and staff of the clinic will then work with those affected patients to solve the legal problems and to make poor people healthier.

Benfer explained why she believes she can do this.

"My dad is a health-care administrator," just retired. "My father's work ethic was to make the world a better place, to go to hospitals that were at rock bottom and to lift them up and improve them as much as he could to create long-term stability and sustainability."

Her family moved around a lot as a result while her father, David, worked to save one troubled hospital after another. Benfer said she grew up in Ohio, Michigan and three towns in Illinois.

"I spent a lot of time in Detroit with my father. He did a lot of work with HIV-AIDS clinics." Emily's work with her dad included cleaning, construction, and "a little bit of everything."

She's also worked for Habitat for Humanity and "a lot of soup kitchens."

The last hospital her father worked at was the Hospital of St. Raphael in New Haven, Conn., a community teaching hospital affiliated with Yale University School of Medicine.

"When he arrived, they told him the hospital was bankrupt. He took it upon himself to assess not only the problems of the hospital but the surrounding community. He adopted all the houses that were condemned" and occupied by drug users and street gangs "and turned them into low-income housing."
St. Raphael is still in business.

Getting started in her own career in public interest, Benfer spent two years in the Peace Corps in Zimbabwe, Belize and Thailand. The local situation got too dangerous in the first two countries in the opinion of the Peace Corps, so she was transferred twice.

"My parents were terrified. They have stories about getting these strange messages from the Peace Corps, 'Someone you love wants you to know they're safe.'"

After the Peace Corps, Benfer moved back home, which by then was New Haven, and worked at the New Haven Legal Assistance Association getting ready to go to law school at Indiana University.

In New Haven, she discovered "medical-legal partnerships where the medical field and the legal field work together to uncover social and legal issues that result in health problems."

The model, she said, was developed by the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership in Boston.

She said she quickly persuaded her father at St. Raphael to join such a partnership with Yale law students and New Haven Legal Assistance. "That partnership is still going on."

Then she got her law degree at Indiana University School of Law.

Among her achievements since then, according to Loyola, Benfer represented pre-school-aged children with disabilities in a class action against the District of Columbia. She also drafted and got passed a local law in the District of Columbia to improve access to schools for children who are homeless.

To explain the latter, she said the District of Columbia refused to participate in a federal program to allow homeless children living in shelters or in cars or with other families to continue to attend their original schools. (School transfers set children back six months, she said.)

Benfer persuaded D.C. to join the federal program and even to extend its benefits to children in public housing.

She received the Equal Justice Works Martindale Hubbell Exemplary Public Service Award and the American Bar Association Judy M. Weightman Memorial Public Interest Award along with numerous others, according to Loyola.

Last year, Benfer learned that Loyola Chicago law school wanted to start a legal clinic related to health law.

Upon applying, "Every encounter I had with any member of the Loyola community left me … thrilled and excited about the opportunity." Every student she spoke to, when asked, "what gets
students excited?" always answered, according to Benfer, "Oh, that's easy, public interest, social justice."

Loyola liked Benfer's answers, too, and hired her.

Loyola law's Health Justice Project under Benfer will be a partnership with Erie Family Health Centers, which has nine sites in Chicago. The clinic will train all members of Erie's staff to look for social problems and legal problems that make poor people sick and refer those matters to the clinic.

For example, infestations of pests and mold may be housing code violations and can cause asthma, Benfer said.

For the first semester, starting in January, the clinic and its law students will focus on administrative law and public benefits, Benfer said. Thus they will fight utility shutoffs and try to help families get financial aid through federal programs.

"These are really great cases for clinics," she said, "because they are usually fast." The clinic will expand from those issues to all others.

"We're delighted that someone as talented and enthusiastic as Emily Benfer has joined the school of law," said Dean David N. Yellen, "to launch a fifth legal clinic that will provide additional opportunities for our students and improve public health outcomes for the disadvantaged."