In its third year, “Advocacy for Policy Change” (LGLS 161b) continued its growth. Strong student interest was reflected in another group of high-quality applicants for the course, yielding an exceptional cohort dedicated to the creation of a just society through legislative advocacy on such issues as foreclosure, immigration, and access to health care. The course benefitted from the dedication of two exceptional teaching assistants from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Melissa Ross and Andrew Hart; and the logistical, financial, and intellectual support of both the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life and the Legal Studies Program at Brandeis University.

“Advocacy for Policy Change” combines an investigation of the ethical dilemmas that arise in the process of lawmaking with hands-on advocacy work. Students are encouraged to think deeply about the complexities of shaping laws for constituents who hold diverse viewpoints about what is right and good for society and how to best progress through the legislative process. Students choose to focus on an existing law they feel could be credibly challenged on ethical or moral grounds, or a proposed law that is being promoted to redress perceived wrongs.

Working in teams, the students research their chosen issues and design and implement models of legislative advocacy. Each team is mentored by a state legislator and/or a member of an advocacy organization, who help them understand the lawmaking process, connect with colleagues, and set realistic goals.

Each student completes a series of assignments related to their project, in formats relevant to advocacy work, such as an “elevator speech” and a short video. (The full list of assignments is on page 5.) What follows in this book are excerpts from these assignments from each project, updates on the bills and budgetary line items, and links to more information on the relevant issues or organizations.

Once again I must thank several people whose support over the past three years has been invaluable. This course would not exist without the ongoing support of Professor Richard Gaskins, my mentor and the Director of the Legal Studies Program. He and Daniel Terris, Director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, took the kernel of a unique idea and made it a reality. Massachusetts State Representative and Brandeis alum Jay Kaufman ’68, MA ’73, and Judy Meredith, Director of the Massachusetts Policy and Organizing Leadership Academy and longtime advocate, helped me to create a course worthy of Brandeis University.

This course is part of the Advocacy for Policy Change initiative, designed to encourage citizens to bring moral and ethical insights to the legislative process. This initiative is supported by generous multi-year commitments from
International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life International Advisory Board member Norbert Weissberg and his wife, former Board member Judith Schneider, to whom the students and I are very grateful. For more about this initiative, see brandeis.edu/ethics/atbrandeis/advocacy.

“Advocacy for Policy Change” has generated considerable excitement at Brandeis University, where students are committed to combining academic pursuits with hands-on work. In three years, this course and this initiative have become integral parts of the Brandeis commitment to social justice. As we prepare for its fourth year our expectations are high for its continued development and achievement.

Melissa Stimell
Associate Professor of the Practice in Legal Studies
Director of Internships, Legal Studies Program
Internship Coordinator, Social Justice and Social Policy Program

Massachusetts State Representative Jay Kaufman ’68, MA ’73, (back row, at right) hosting the students of “Advocacy for Policy Change” at the Massachusetts State House, February 14, 2012.