

Our Mission: Columbia Legal Services (CLS) advocates for people who face injustice and poverty. We seek to achieve social and economic justice for all, using policy reform, litigation, and innovative partnerships to reveal and end actions that harm the communities we serve.

A. How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?

CLS is committed to community driven advocacy. We are trying to listen and respond to the advocacy needs of the communities we serve. Below are the methods we attempt to implement. We have had successes and setbacks since undertaking these approaches. We are still learning. First, we try to listen, then respond to the work the community would like us to do, then after that work is completed we try to maintain a long-term relationship with that group.

1. Listening

We engage communities we do not have a relationship by attending community meetings and events with no agenda of our own to listen we just show up. In the past, we have sometimes connected to communities only when we needed to for our own work purposes rather than as a regular part of our work. In the past, reached out to communities to see what they can do for us like giving us feedback, volunteering to testify on our legislation or supporting our initiatives.

We are now trying to follow rather than lead communities. We now listen and respond to community members about what legal assistance they need rather than what work we would like. This change is an attempt to cede our power as “experts” to people most impacted by the issue to learn what they need and then respond in an affirmative way as followers rather than leaders.

2. Saying yes.

Rather than “screen” folks out we are trying to “screen in” – to be responsive as much as we can to the needs of community folks who are organizing around issues and need legal help. We are now saying yes to requests from community groups to undertake work where do not have specific expertise. Prior to this if a community request did not fit within that issue we would screen them out. Now we are trying to be more flexible. For example, there was a blast email that went out from the group Ending the Prison Industrial Complex (EPIC) asking for financial and legal support to stop construction of the new youth jail in King County. They needed additional help with the legal work involved in the land use issues with the City and County. We said yes even though we are not experts in land use law and related issues and had not taken on this type of work before.

In another case, we were contacted by community leaders in Yakima regarding an issue around policing and immigration and the actions of city council. The Yakima City Council held a vote on the subject through a process that was not open or transparent. The community organizers on the police and immigration issues wanted representation to force a revote with proper notice.

We had not done a case like that before, but we took on the case. We enforced the Open Meetings Act and were successful in obtaining a proper process under the law.

In both these instances we took a risk and we found partners who helped us when we needed technical assistance in a specific legal area. Taking these risks helped us to respond to the community identified legal needs rather than the legal issues we are most comfortable working on through a set intake structure.

3. Maintaining Flexible Long-Term Relationships with Community Based Organizations

Once we have listened, said yes and concluded the advocacy for a community group, we have worked diligently to stay connected to that organization over the long term. There are times when we have not succeeded in this endeavor and have lost long term contact. One success is our continued positive relationship with the Tenants Union of Washington (TU) over the last decade. We started working with the TU in 2008 on issues related to substandard housing, housing authority accountability and access to housing for all. This relationship is successful because we have been flexible and responded to the different needs of the organization during its organizational life cycle. This long-term relationship creates trust in the community to know that CLS will be there to support tenant advocacy and organizing. This trusting relationship creates the necessary foundation for long term systemic change work.

B. How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities?

Members of the community in South Seattle watched the Rainier Beach Community Center being built, but when they asked their friends and family if they had a job on the construction team the answer was no. The community was extremely frustrated not to have employment opportunities on a city funded project in their community. A community based group worked with their community to come up with solutions to this issue. One idea was to force the city to hire residents for construction projects like this one. This group, Got Green, contacted our organization to see if this type of requirement would pass legal muster.

“We want to be a part of rebuilding our community.”

--YouthCare YouthBuild Participant



Source: Public Comment, Housing Affordability, Human Services & Economic Resiliency Committee, Seattle City Council, December 4, 2014, SeattleChannel.org

Got Green asked us to represent them to conduct legal research on this issue and to help craft an ordinance that would solve the problem identified by community members. We spent more than a year in meetings with Got Green and a community coalition they formed on this issue. We listened to their needs to help create an ordinance that would survive a legal challenge and achieve the desired result. This intensive listening was critical to the success of the legislation. We had to be able to communicate complex constitutional issues in a way that was coherent. We also learned to listen deeply to make sure a complicated law really would have the results desired by the community. The result was the Priority Hire Ordinance.



The Priority Hire Ordinance:

- Prioritizes local construction workers living in economically distressed ZIP codes on large City public works projects.
- Supports women and people of color in the construction workforce
- Requires a Community Workforce Agreement.

Priority Hire Ordinance: How it Works

The law passed and was successful in increasing the hiring of residents from economically distressed neighborhoods. In a 2017 City of Seattle report, the number of these workers hired increased from 12% to 26% on these projects. They worked an average of 185 % more hours than before passage of the law. Ultimately, the workers brought home \$7 million more in wages than they have earned prior to the law. The number of African American apprentices doubled their number of apprentice hours and women's apprentice hours increased nearly 6 times after the law went into effect.

C. How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?

Our work on pesticide drift exposure for Washington farm workers addresses systemic inequities that affect health of community members living in rural hard to reach areas. First, we connect with them through systematic ongoing outreach at the places where they work rather than requiring that they come to our offices. We provide written information in their language in an accessible format; our attorneys and outreach workers are fluent in Spanish which is the primary language. As a result, we have built trusted relationships with this community over time. Through this work, farm workers identified pesticide exposure as a significant health concern. We learned that pesticide exposure causes farm workers to suffer more chemically-

related injuries and illnesses than any other occupational group in the nation. They told us the factors that contributed to this problem- lack of health insurance, language barriers, immigration status, cultural factors, lack of transportation, and fear of retaliation for reporting the exposure as well as a powerful and influential farm lobby.

We have engaged in litigation on behalf of exposed workers to hold bad actors accountable, worked with farmworkers to write a [report](#) in English and Spanish, helped create a [video](#) on the issue as well as supporting farm workers to lobby for legislation on these issues. Most importantly, we are supporting farm workers with the legal needs that result as they organize themselves into Unions to leverage their power with growers.

D. What about your organization’s way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships?

At CLS we started looking at our culture in depth after we conducted a 2012 diversity survey.ⁱ That survey found that over 3 in 4 employees witnessed inattention to diversity issues that created negative consequences for staff morale and staff retention. This finding was despite an active Inclusion, Diversity and Multi-culturalism committee (IDM). We attempted to fix the problem but were unsuccessful.

Looking back what we failed to do was to undertake an analysis of our organizational culture, norms, and power relations.ⁱⁱ We did not take time out to reflect on our values as an organization – both explicit and implicit. While we were “good people” trying to make change for the better, we did not consider the dynamics of internal racism, power relations or the need for accountability to people and communities of color. We also did not examine how these issues played out in our advocacy. While we celebrated having a diverse staff and board and successful advocacy, we had not yet specifically analyzed our organization through a race equity frame or as an institution working in a legal system that had regularly and systematically reinforced white supremacy.ⁱⁱⁱ We are currently engaged in this process through affinity groups, implementing a tool to evaluate advocacy with a focus on racial justice and community based work and we now have a full time paid Equity Director to ensure implementation and evaluation.

We have changed our structure to add specific community engagement specialists/policy analysts with connections to the communities they serve. One advocate works with young people of color to addresses systemic racism in the juvenile justice system. This advocate spent a year reaching out to children and their families that were caught up in the criminal justice system. Through his consistent outreach and engagement with both the children who were incarcerated and their families he developed trusting relationships. The youth he worked with were detained in the adult justice system. Many were kept in solitary confinement where they were locked in small, stark cells absent any windows or natural light, sometimes with no more than 15 minutes out of isolation every three days for weeks or months at a time.

Eventually, through his work we were filed a class action law suit to stop the practice of placing youth in solitary confinement where they suffered physical and psychological harm. Because of this lawsuit, King County passed a law outlawing this practice. This new structure had made us successful in connecting with hard to reach communities and those significantly isolated from the rest of the community.

D. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps?

We have learned so much from our missteps. Recently, we wrote an article about an area of advocacy where we learned much from our mistakes. We represented the TU in advocacy to reduce barriers to housing for people with criminal histories.

<http://povertylaw.org/clearinghouse/stories/bergstrom>.

Our client, the Tenants Union, directed us to pursue this work from a community-organizing perspective, so that specific policy responses came directly from the community. As a result, both groups created a new coalition - the Fair and Accessible Renting for Everyone (FARE) coalition launched its campaign at a December 2015 community event featuring a spoken-word artist, a panel discussion with affected people, and testimony. We heard from the public, advocates, and city council members. From that event [FARE](#) membership grew. Thanks to thoughtful and dedicated outreach, turnout over the first few months was strong, with representation from many of the communities disproportionately burdened by the justice system. FARE ultimately had over 20 organizational sponsors and around 300 individual members. After robust discussions, the coalition agreed on an advocacy campaign that would bring cultural relevance to standard policymaking. First, FARE would develop a visual storytelling exhibition using the model of [PhotoVoice](#). Second, FARE would draft a bill proposal from scratch, using language from the people most affected. Both projects failed.

PhotoVoice is a project through which people tell their own stories using photography. It had been used successfully by a member of the FARE coalition in a legislative campaign, and it appealed to FARE for its blend of authenticity and creativity. We planned exhibitions in each of the seven city council districts and a final large display at Seattle City Hall. As we began to implement the plan, we quickly learned the importance of flexibility. When we had trouble tracking down the cameras, we had to cut out the smaller district exhibitions. And when, despite our best efforts, we retrieved only one of the cameras sent out into the community, we reluctantly had to scrap PhotoVoice altogether. We realized that we as

Despite the harsh reality check, we were still on track to complete our "community law drafting" process by the end of 2016; this would leave the first half of 2017 for the legislative push. FARE held several meetings around the city to build a foundation of priorities. We found consensus that FARE members wanted to limit a landlord's right to examine criminal histories as much as possible.

Concurrently the City had formed its own committee to examine the Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda recommendation. Columbia Legal Services, along with other members of FARE, landlords, a tenant-screening lobbyist, and other groups, had a seat at that committee. Thanks to our overlapping memberships in both FARE and the City's committee, we knew that the City's committee would likely recommend legislation featuring a "lookback period," which is an amount of time postconviction during which a criminal record could be considered by landlords. Given the long history of failing to pass a law on this issue, any limitation on a landlord's use of records seemed like a positive compromise.

For this reason, much of the FARE deliberation during the "community law drafting" was on the length of the lookback period and on whether we would be willing to compromise. In retrospect, we see that in a room full of people directly harmed by this issue, we were discussing what level of continued oppression we might be happy to accept. This was

untenable. Much of activism's value lies in its freedom from institutional political constraints; we were trying to force grassroots activism into the institutional written framework it meant to dismantle. In retrospect, we see that in a room full of people directly harmed by this issue, we were discussing what level of continued oppression we might be happy to accept.

Having fallen short on our two main campaign goals (creating a visual storytelling exhibition and drafting a law from scratch), the FARE coalition met for a reassessment. The data and the stories FARE gathered supported the one idea we all agreed on—to ban the use of criminal records in tenant screening entirely—but the City's stakeholder group placed a two-year lookback period in the proposed ordinance. Some FARE members were pleased with the 2 year look back period. But FARE members ultimately decided to continue to fight for the agreed-upon no lookback period.

As FARE brought the same message to more council members in the following weeks through their stories and experiences, opponents could not identify a single source that showed criminal records predicted a bad tenancy. A significant turning point came when a council member wrote an [editorial](#) no lookback period whatsoever. We were tense when the time came for a committee vote on the no-lookback amendment. Our tension turned to excitement when the committee passed it and then the full council passed the [ordinance](#) passed 8 to 0.

What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

What gives me hope is how farm workers have organized since the 2016 election. Many folks working on social justice became depressed, wondered how they could make change and felt powerless. At the same time, communities targeted by the federal administration began to organize in significant ways. On one farm, [H2A workers](#) protested the lack of health care for a fellow worker who later died as well their horrendous working conditions. The protestors were fired, but continue to fight in spite the dangers of rising up. The workers have asked for legal help in their fight. We filed a [class action lawsuit](#) on their behalf. Other agricultural workers across the state are [standing up for their rights](#).

Workers, organizers and lawyers are standing together to transfer economic power from owners to the people doing the work through Unions and related lawsuits. This power shift gives me hope of a more equitable future. A new world is possible.

ⁱ We had a response rate of over 90%.

ⁱⁱ From White Racist to White Anti-Racist, Tema Okun, dR Works

<https://whatsup.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/whatsup-week3-readings1.pdf/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Dismantling Racism 2016 Workbook, p. 9-15; Race – The Power of an Illusion, Film Transcript for Episode 3 (sets out the ways policies and subsequent related court decisions advantaged certain groups over others)

http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-about-03-01.htm; History of Racism and Immigration Time Line, Racial Equity Tools (stops at 2005) <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/racismimmigration-timeline.pdf>; A History of Racial Injustice, Equal Justice Initiative (through 2010) <https://racialinjustice.eji.org/timeline/2010s/>; <http://www.eraseracismny.org/structural-racism-timeline>.