

# Real change is hard. And necessary.

By CATHY HAUKEHAHL

In legal aid programs, it can become easy enough to think we're doing our social justice work, and addressing systemic discrimination, simply by serving our clients every day. But I've come to realize that what we're already doing in our day-to-day work is not nearly enough.

Legal aid clients throughout Minnesota, as across the country, are disproportionately people of color, people with disabilities, and women (particularly women with children). At Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid (MMLA), we advised and represented 10,800 clients in 2015. Of these, 55 percent were people of color, 59 percent were women, and more than 25 percent had either physical or mental disabilities.

This happens because people of color, people with disabilities, and women disproportionately have the very low incomes qualifying them for legal aid's services. A family of four is eligible for MMLA's help if they have a household income of less than \$30,375. So we continually see in our clients' lives the impact of disparities associated with poverty, and specifically, the racial disparities that exist in so many areas—employment, education, housing, health, and incarceration.

Some of MMLA's work takes on discrimination and disparities directly, particularly in certain focused areas. For example, our Housing Discrimination Law Project has brought to justice landlords who discriminate based on race and national origin.

Our Minnesota Disability Law Center has sued numerous hospital systems to make them comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act's requirements regarding access for people who are deaf.

But we are asking ourselves, how can we move beyond these specialized areas to break down the disparities and systemic discrimination our clients face? How can we do more to make equal justice a reality? We realize that our day-to-day work, while critical to helping our clients on the pathway out of poverty, is not sufficient to bring about the broader and deeper changes we want to see.

We've also realized that we must start with ourselves. We must accept and address our own implicit bias. We must have a staff that better reflects our client community. We must improve the ways we listen to and hear what our client community is saying about their needs. We must develop and use a racial equity lens when we do our day-to-day work throughout all of our practice areas.

Why is this important? Because diverse voices identify more varied solutions to the seemingly intransigent challenges of discrimination and disparity. The initiatives identified offer

more creativity. When we include, rather than exclude, we build trust in each other and confidence that decisions, processes, and systems will operate more fairly. When we stretch ourselves to think in a more multi-faceted way, it's harder to fall back on old patterns and stereotypes. We also discover (or rediscover) our commonalities as human beings.

MMLA was fortunate to have the Shriver National Center on Poverty Law select a team of our staff to participate in the Center's second-ever Racial Justice Training Institute, a several-month online and in-person training on implicit bias and developing a racial equity lens in legal aid work. Since the training, the team has worked closely with Legal Aid's senior management group to share and implement what the team

learned, both within Legal Aid and at the Minnesota Legal Services State-wide Conference in 2015. Members of the team are leading two internal initiatives with other Legal Aid staff. One initiative is examining our effectiveness in hiring and retaining diverse staff. The other initiative is expanding our understanding of implicit bias and how better to develop a racial justice lens for our work.

One of our biggest lessons so far has been to acknowledge the slow pace and difficulty of genuine change. For example, how do we free up more resources to take on race disparities in a significant way when limited resources force us to turn away 60 percent of eligible clients who contact us, and most of our funding requires

us to provide specific amounts and types of services? How do we attract and retain attorneys from diverse backgrounds when our salaries are low, and so many people leave law school with heavy debt burdens? There are no easy answers. We face continuous and hard work if we want to make real change.

Earlier this year, I read *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. Mr. Stevenson has committed his entire legal career to challenging bias against people of color and the poor in the criminal justice system. He founded the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, where he is executive director. In the book, he makes this arresting statement: "The opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice." Lawyers, at legal aid programs and elsewhere, are uniquely qualified to bring justice to all. This is not merely an aspirational goal. It is a business and societal imperative. Including and hearing all voices will lead us there. ▲

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