

TOWARD JUSTICE

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HOUSING UNIT

BIPOC staff innovate to serve clients in housing court

Over half of Legal Aid's clients identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). Most attorneys, court personnel, and judges are white. When BIPOC clients encounter housing court, it can be a particularly intimidating experience. It makes a huge difference when advocates share background with clients and bring that extra level of understanding and compassion to the interaction.

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Alisha Bowen and Luz Lopez Rosas are legal assistants in Legal Aid’s housing unit. Bowen is a Black woman and Lopez Rosas is Chicana, and they both very intentionally weave their lived experience with professional skills and community knowledge to bring a holistic, human-centered approach to legal services work.

“We see a lack of trust from our clients, especially BIPOC clients, as they face a white legal system,” says Lopez Rosas. “Attorneys often view things systematically and logically. When it comes to changing things on a larger scale, I echo Cornel West in that, ‘Justice is what love looks like in public.’ Attorneys need to understand their clients and try to be in their shoes.”

BIPOC Advocates for BIPOC Clients

Before coming to Legal Aid, Lopez Rosas was a community organizer and Bowen worked with HOME Line, a tenant advocacy organization. They both work now with the Eviction Representation Project. They appear virtually in housing court, where they meet with clients for their initial hearings. Lopez Rosas also does case management and focuses on outreach and relationship-building with community organizations.

Bowen’s role shifted with the onset of COVID-19 and the changes to housing court. She created virtual courtrooms in Legal Aid’s office configuring enhanced audio and video equipment in rooms with plexiglass dividers and other safety features that allow attorneys and clients to be in the same room for hearings. This has been especially important for survivors of domestic violence and clients with limited technical skills or computer access.

“I’m a problem-solver,” Bowen says. “I try to see the bigger picture: how we can better serve our clients and make everything more accessible for them. With the pandemic, our operations drastically changed. We’ve had to be innovative.”

Legal Aid now has four virtual courtrooms in the Minneapolis office, which are also used by Central Minnesota Legal Services, and two in the St. Cloud office. The design was replicated by several other legal services offices in the state and recognized by Hennepin County District Court. During a Federal Settlement Conference, the U.S. Attorney’s office admired the split screen capability and setup.

“Automation has made the housing unit much more efficient,” Bowen says. “We make things easier so we can focus on what matters — putting 110% into our clients and the legal work that is required to defend their rights. Take care of what’s important and automate the rest — that’s going to be my motto for life!”

Leading Organizational Change

In addition to their client work, Bowen and Lopez Rosas bring their BIPOC identities and experience to Legal Aid’s internal work as they are helping to build anti-racist practices and accountability throughout the organization. Most notably, they have initiated the Bowen Scholarship (see p.3), which will help develop the careers of more attorneys of color. They also helped implement an LSAT training program for Legal Aid non-attorney staff who want to go to law school.

Both Bowen and Lopez Rosas plan to go to law school and continue in public interest law careers. Their experience at Legal Aid has given them an up-close view of the racial disparities in the legal system and the need for strong advocates.

As Legal Aid adjusts to changing times, leaders like Bowen and Lopez Rosas help the organization imagine its way into a new future. The past year has called for innovative technology, an expanding vision of how to best serve clients, and broader goals for community justice. Bowen and Lopez Rosas have been key players in helping Legal Aid answer those calls.

Introducing the Bowen Scholarship Fund

Legal Aid's new Bowen Scholarship program will help cover \$25,000 in law school tuition and expenses for BIPOC employees who want to pursue law degrees. It is the brainchild of Alisha Bowen and Luz Lopez Rosas, legal assistants in the housing unit.

"We noticed that most Legal Aid attorneys are white," Lopez Rosas says. "Being part of the housing unit has solidified the importance of having attorneys who share the lived experiences of the clients we serve. There's a different cultural exchange that happens when the advocate has a deeper understanding or shared identity with the clients."

The gulf in racial disparity in Minnesota between clients and legal professionals is wide. Most attorneys, court personnel, and judges are white. In fact, in the Twin Cities, only 7.2% of attorneys are people of color. Within Legal Aid, 83% of attorneys are white.

"When I saw the lack of diversity in our attorney staff, I asked myself — how can we fix this?" says Bowen. "Law school is required to become an attorney, and we know the barriers for BIPOC, immigrants, and low-income folks. The idea of the scholarship is to relieve some of those barriers and increase the chances of success."

As members of Legal Aid's BIPOC Advisory Committee, Bowen and Lopez Rosas researched the issue of barriers to

career development, created an outline for the scholarship program, and presented the plan to leadership. The scholarship program received unanimous support.

Bowen Scholarship Basics:

- Grants are \$25,000 each to help cover tuition, fees, and other law-school related expenses.
- All current MMLA non-attorney staff who are from traditionally underrepresented or disadvantaged communities and/or members of a recognized Native American tribe are eligible.
- MMLA has set aside an initial \$100,000 to establish the scholarship fund.
- MMLA has a goal to raise an additional \$100,000 annually from generous donors who share a commitment to diversifying the legal profession.

Bowen and Lopez Rosas are available to present about the scholarship to bar associations, community partners, and other organizations. They hope Legal Aid's donors and community partners will join the effort. To contribute, go to www.mylegalaid.org and in the donation designation drop-down menu, select "Bowen Scholarship." To contact Bowen and Lopez Rosas, email abowen@mylegalaid.org.

Legal Aid stands for racial justice.

Diversity, inclusion, and equity are core values for Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid, and it is critical that we incorporate these values into all aspects of our work. We recognize the particular and highly detrimental impact of racism — and Minnesota's racial disparities — on MMLA's clients and staff. We will therefore devote special attention to issues of racial justice.

We commit to:



Ensuring our work is rooted in communities which we serve.



Strengthening our organizational capacity through increased racial diversity, inclusion, and equity.



Developing and applying a racial equity lens to our work with clients.



Advancing the cause of racial justice in our client representation and policy advocacy work.

WILLMAR OFFICE

Seeking justice with the language of trust

When Staff Attorney Armando Calderón was in college and law school, he spent his summers working with mostly Spanish-speaking migrant workers in the Willmar area. After law school, he was recruited into the medical malpractice field where he was involved with legal and corporate cases in the United States and Europe. In January of 2020, Calderón returned to his Minnesota roots and passion for social justice, bringing 20 years of legal experience to Legal Aid's Willmar office.

"No matter where you're working in the legal field, if you're a person who believes in social justice and equity, you put those ideas into practice," Calderón says.

Family law makes up the bulk of Calderón's caseload, but he also works with benefits, consumer law, and housing. He expects to see more housing cases as the eviction moratorium off-ramp continues. As a native speaker of Spanish, he is the Willmar office's go-to attorney for Spanish speakers. In family law, he prioritizes cases involving abuse and neglect.

"One of the hardest things about this job is keeping a healthy balance and mindset," Calderón says. "When I talk to my family about the situations that our clients face every day, they think it's all suffering, every day. My mom thought I should quit, but when I shared some of the outcomes with her, she said, 'well, maybe you're doing good things.'"

Clients Who Speak Quiché

Recently, Calderón took a phone call from a family of refugees from an Indian village in Guatemala. The parents speak Quiché and have limited proficiency in Spanish. They were deeply concerned by a summons they received from conciliation court. Legal Aid doesn't usually handle conciliation court cases, but Calderón saw the need and set aside some time to help the family.

"The parents both work full time, so the calls had to happen in the evenings, and it's tough to find a Quiché interpreter," Calderón says. "It was a team effort to build understanding, and we had some help from the client's teenage children."



"My clients were so happy to have someone work through the process with them and grateful for the help," Calderón says. "That's what makes us different. Communication and trust take time, and retaining a private attorney would've been difficult on all levels, especially financially."

Welcoming Change

Legal Aid has seen many changes in the past two years — changes to our practices, our staff, our community connections, and our clients. With this newsletter, we celebrate the work of some of our newer staff. We also roll with more change as we bid farewell to Executive Director Drew Schaffer and welcome Danielle Shelton Walczak to the position.

Drew has relocated to Arizona to be closer to family. He guided Legal Aid through four challenging years that included the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the ensuing uprisings for racial justice, and a global pandemic. Through it all, he supported his colleagues in creative litigation linked with policy advocacy for sustainable and systemic change, and he also led an organizational commitment to racial equity and inclusion. Drew has taken a new position with a justice-seeking organization in Arizona. We thank him and wish him all the best in his new endeavor.

We are excited to welcome our new Executive Director Danielle Shelton Walczak.

A former practicing litigator in the areas of family law, discrimination, and general civil litigation, Danielle has focused her career on working with historically disenfranchised populations and indigent clients. As Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Minnesota State Bar Association, she created the association's first diversity strategic plan. Most recently, she served as the Director of Strategic Initiatives for the City of Minneapolis.



Danielle's aspirational goal for Legal Aid is to grow our capacity so we are able to serve every individual who is eligible for our services. Providing legal services to individuals is the organization's core work, and she is deeply committed to expanding capacity and honoring that core.

Danielle is also dedicated to cultivating a workplace environment that fills the staff's needs and desires while maintaining an excellent standard of service. She brings experience and skills to develop Legal Aid's racial justice work so the organization is not inadvertently perpetuating internal or external racist or inequitable behaviors.

We look forward to moving ahead with Danielle's vision toward the day when every Minnesotan who faces injustice has the skilled and knowledgeable legal support they need. Security, self-sufficiency, and access to opportunity for all!

Read more about Danielle Shelton Walczak on our blog at: mylegalaid.org/news/whats-new.

The case itself was relatively simple. The client had a medical bill that went unpaid for over a year when their health insurance expired. They were very upset when they received the court papers and learned about the bill for the first time. The family knew they owed money and were willing to pay but were deeply worried about going to a courthouse in rural Minnesota where no one knew their language and communication would be difficult.

Taking Action and Building Trust

Calderón reached out to the creditor, spoke to their attorney, and explained the situation. The creditor and attorney were fortunately very understanding and willing to work out an arrangement. Together, they came up with a proposal for the family to pay a reduced lump sum.

“My clients were so happy to have someone work through the process with them and grateful for the help,” Calderón says. “That’s what makes us different. Communication and trust take time, and retaining a private attorney would’ve been difficult on all levels, especially financially.”

Calderón sees all of the ways that limited English proficiency makes it challenging for the Somali and Hispanic populations in central Minnesota to navigate systems. Housing issues are particularly difficult with applications, vouchers, and leases to understand and sign. In rural areas, landlords often manage housing vouchers for Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and they are not required to have language or interpreter services. In those cases, language hurdles play a huge role in disputes like repairs or harassment.

An Uncompromising Commitment to Justice

“For me, the most exciting part of working at Legal Aid is being a part of the genuine, uncompromising commitment that Legal Aid has to social justice,” says Calderón. “Every day I see my colleagues truly implementing the core values with passion and a great skill set. That attitude toward justice is contagious.”

LEGAL SERVICES ADVOCACY PROJECT

Winning is good: Six legislative triumphs for Legal Aid's advocacy group

Legal Services Advocacy Project (LSAP) is Legal Aid's policy arm that lobbies for systemic change at the legislature. This team brings legal, policy, and technical expertise to relationships with community partners and legislators advocating for laws that improve the ability of Legal Aid's clients to meet basic needs. Supervising Attorney Ron Elwood has been with LSAP for 23 years and Staff Attorney Jess Webster for 15.

Staff Attorney Maren Hulden is LSAP's newest member, joining in 2018. Experience as a Staff Attorney with Legal Aid's Minnesota Disability Law Center (MDLC) helped Hulden develop deep relationships with individuals, organizations, and coalitions in the disability community. She continues to work closely with MDLC attorneys to bring their insights to legislative issues.

"Hope and optimism are essential to our job, and Maren embodies those qualities," says Webster. "We've always been a scrappy team of optimists, and Maren's focus on kindness and her tenacious belief in what is possible raises all of our work."

The 2021 legislative session was a good one for the entire LSAP team. Some bills that have been years in the making were passed into law, and others that were just introduced this year bring much-needed relief for Legal Aid's client communities.

MFIP Cost of Living Adjustment

The 2021 Legislature passed a permanent Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for Minnesota Family Investment Plan (MFIP) payments. After 33 years with no increase to MFIP, payments increased by \$100 in 2019, a step achieved after years of advocacy. The COLA will prevent future stagnation and build a foundation for more support for the families that need it most.

End to School Lunch Shaming

For families who fall behind on school lunch bills, Minnesota law now prohibits punitive actions toward the students, including limiting participation in student activities. The bill,

which had strong bipartisan support, removes all doubt about the state's commitment to keep finances between the school and the parents.

New Consumer Protections for Homeowners

Two bills enacted in 2021 will help keep clients — especially elders — in their homes. One bill expands Minnesota's law to protect consumers from unscrupulous "equity stripping" scams. The second will help prevent foreclosure of reverse mortgages by ensuring a trusted third party is notified when the homeowner misses insurance or property tax payments.

Prioritizing Independence for People with Disabilities

Thanks to the work of a huge coalition, Minnesota law now clearly states that people with disabilities, during an informed decision-making process, can choose where they work, where they live, how they want to direct their services, and what assistive technology they need. The bill includes federal money directed for transition services to help people with disabilities move into their own homes.

Phasing Out Subminimum Wage for People with Disabilities

Minnesota is one of the highest users of the exception to federal fair labor standards, with almost 8,000 Minnesotans with disabilities currently paid below minimum wage. The 2021 Legislature designated a task force of people with disabilities and other stakeholders to develop a plan to phase out subminimum wage over the next four years. This phase-out allows for a smooth and thoughtful transition for workers and employers, gradually eliminating the practice of paying subminimum wages to persons with disabilities in Minnesota.

Educational Access During COVID-19

Many students with disabilities struggle with distance learning, especially students who use in-person supports to build and maintain self-regulation skills needed to make academic progress. LSAP was part of a grassroots-led effort to introduce



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a recovery education bill that was passed into law. Schools are now required to meet with parents, discuss the impact of the pandemic, and ask what additional supports and services are needed. School districts are receiving additional federal money to provide services like this, and advocates are encouraging school districts to be creative and generous in their support of students.

“Education was maybe the hottest topic this session,” Webster notes. “Maren was instrumental in bringing that debate to the next level. She’s so good at clearing away the noise and redirecting the energy toward what everyone wants — the best for the kids.”

This year’s legislative session started with an anticipated budget deficit, but the American Rescue Plan designated specific pots of money for special education and home- and community-based services for people with disabilities. Hulden’s relationships with the disability community helped bring together individuals and coalitions to create legislation that will benefit Minnesotans for years to come.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE TODAY

Today, there are people in our community who desperately need help to keep a home, find safety from violence, get health care coverage, or finally get the disability services they need.

YOUR GIFT MAKES THAT HAPPEN.

Go to www.mylegalaid.org, and click “Donate” in the upper right corner.

**LET’S MAKE 2022 BRIGHTER
FOR ALL OF US.**



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Legal Aid has received the Charities Review Seal, given to nonprofits exemplifying quality, ethics, accountability and transparency.

DEI work deepens understanding of systemic racism

In January of 2020, Legal Aid furthered its diversity and equity goals by hiring Jolene Chestnut as MMLA's Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Officer. The addition of a DEI Officer expands the organization's ability to integrate a race and equity lens into its work, as well as to support its attorneys and staff. A dedicated DEI Officer is another clear demonstration of Legal Aid's commitment to fully live our Racial Justice Values Statement (see p. 3).

With a stronger focus on these values, Legal Aid employees are leaning into the discomfort that often comes with profound discussions and analysis about inherited racist and inequitable systems. Staff are examining the learned vocabularies, behaviors, cultural norms, and policies that perpetuate these systems internally for our staff members and

externally for our clients.

All staff will gain critical information and insight about generational and cultural traumas that not only affect our colleagues but also the populations we serve. The goal is to ensure that we do not unintentionally contribute to ongoing systemic harm.

Calls for increasingly direct conversations about the impact of race and inequities in the workplace highlight the urgency of DEI work. Public commitment to racial justice is important, but commitment without planning, actionable steps, and accountability rings hollow.

