



Our “Why”

Since our founding, Columbia Legal Services (CLS) has **advocated for laws that advance social, economic, and racial equity for people living in poverty**. Our focus has always included serving the needs of people who are incarcerated or who do not have U.S. immigration status and using the powerful legal tools of **policy advocacy** and **class action** litigation.

Our new strategic direction focuses more explicitly on community-centered advocacy to create a world where every person enjoys full human rights and economic opportunities. Through our **community-led legal advocacy**, we hold ourselves, government agencies, institutions, and other actors accountable to address the root causes of racism and their manifestation in unfair treatment and inequitable access to resources, power, and opportunities based on race.

We will primarily focus our advocacy on dismantling and transforming two of the key racialized systems that perpetuate poverty, injustice, and dehumanization: **mass incarceration** and the impacts of the **immigration system**.

Why These Two Systems?

- Every aspect of our systems of punishment and accountability – from foster care and school discipline to policing and prosecution to conviction and sentencing and to imprisonment and reentry – is deeply racialized. While we no longer have explicit Jim Crow laws, their legacy continues to reverberate. **Mass incarceration** results in exclusion of people, disproportionately people of color, from societal structures, including education, employment, housing, financial institutions, public spaces, health care, and the social safety nets.
- Likewise, our **immigration laws and system** are designed to exclude certain groups from access to protections and benefits promised by law. As a result of their immigration status, many people lack basic employment protections, health care, housing and public benefits, and, increasingly, are targeted for civil and criminal sanctions through our legal and justice systems. Many face increasing discrimination in most aspects of civic life.

“ We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it. ”
- Michelle Alexander

These systems are about who belongs and who does not on every level.

Why Community-Centered Advocacy?

We believe that to achieve justice, all communities should have a voice in the creation and implementation of the policies, laws, and legal systems that impact them. While we acknowledge individual needs for services, we focus our resources, legal skills, and knowledge to support and advance the **collective power of communities** and social movements to create institutions and laws that are designed and implemented by those most directly impacted.

Our “How”

Mass Incarceration and Immigration Advocacy

- Remediating inhumane conditions in jails, prisons, and the immigration detention center for youth and adults
- Advancing policies to address the overuse of incarceration and financial penalties
- Challenging the laws and practices that target, exclude, and criminalize people based on their immigration status or previous justice system involvement
- Fighting to ensure full employment protections for all workers, regardless of immigration or incarceration status
- Working toward an inclusive health care system that does not exclude people based on their immigration or incarceration status
- Dismantling pipelines to prison for youth, including reforming the foster care system and juvenile detention practices

Policy Advocacy for People Living in Poverty

We continue to undertake policy advocacy outside of our focus areas to support or reject legislation identified as a priority or problem by Alliance for Justice and community partners where there is a critical need, no one else can do it, and it impacts people living in poverty. This includes

- Protecting low-income consumers by relieving the burdens of debt and garnishment, including student loan and medical debt
- Working to preserve access to public benefits for all families
- Supporting expanded rights for tenants and defending against bad housing bills

We recognize that history frames our present and future. We are conscious of the racism that is deeply embedded in our legal framework and acknowledge our own complicity in perpetuating these harmful systems, while also aspiring to become an anti-racist organization.

CLS is part of the **Alliance for Equal Justice**, a network of Washington State organizations that work together in a collaborative way to coordinate strategy and delivery of civil legal aid to people and communities that experience poverty and injustice.