

The Road We Took – 2018 Strategic Planning

When the board hired Merf Ehman as the new executive director of Columbia Legal Services (CLS) in June 2017, they requested that Merf lead a strategic planning process for the organization. This planning was necessary because there had been significant changes at CLS and for our client populations since our last strategic plan in 2011, including (1) relentless attacks on immigrant and poor communities and communities of color by the federal administration, (2) decreases in funding, and (3) significant turnover in staff and leadership. CLS staff, board, and key stakeholders undertook extensive data gathering to gain a comprehensive view of external trends that impact our organization, as well as internal issues for the organization to address.

Primary Themes from Stakeholder Analysis

1. Address shifts in the political landscape and social movements

In our current political and social climate there is an expressed need for more dramatic, faster change because new federal policies are having devastating impacts for many families in our state. Anti-immigration rhetoric and policies increasingly target immigrant communities – particularly people who are undocumented. Privately-controlled immigration detention centers are filling up and mass incarceration continues to devastate families and communities.

2. Connect with community power

Use of a strong race equity lens is paramount as people and communities talk about racial justice in explicit ways. Communities of color are leading and organizing to change the systems that limit their rights and opportunities. CLS must consider how to best to work in relationship with and meet the needs of these activated communities.

3. Create a strong mission focus and not waver from it

At CLS, we aim to disrupt and change these oppressive systems and we are passionate about making a difference in race and other equity and justice issues. CLS has a strong history and reputation, but many of our Alliance and community partners pointed out that the organization has had too many different prioritized areas without a central focus. This resulted in a diffused organizational impact. Moreover, there was confusion on how to access CLS services and the parameters CLS used for identifying and accepting advocacy.

The Road Ahead – Changing Course

Based upon our listening process and analysis of what we learned, we developed a new set of core organizational principles that reflect our unique role in the delivery of legal services in WA.

CLS's Strategic Focus

Through community-led movement lawyering and a systemic approach, we are supporting communities and movements by bringing deep legal expertise that is grounded in – and strongly guided by – an understanding of race equity. We do this by serving those who are disenfranchised by our racialized economic systems, **with a focus on mass incarceration and the broken immigration system**. Our advocacy includes investigating and documenting harm, class action/impact litigation, and policy reform.

Specifically, we will focus on dismantling systems of mass incarceration including failed criminal legal policies such as the overuse of incarceration and financial penalties, inhumane conditions in jails, prisons, and detention centers for youth and adults, and the criminalization of immigration. We will also advocate for the rights of immigrants and people who are undocumented to ensure that they enjoy full human rights.

Values

Community. Our work is directed by the communities we serve. We contribute our legal knowledge and skills to support initiatives that are identified by the community to enhance the community's power.

Race Equity. We hold ourselves accountable to principles of race equity and human rights. Through our community-led legal advocacy, we hold 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.

Justice. 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. We believe that our legal system must be held accountable by the people most impacted by it.

Following this work, we underwent a process to *align our current advocacy with our strategic focus* by asking the following questions:

1. **Is work in this area currently focused primarily on one of our special populations (incarcerated or undocumented people)?**



2. To what degree does the advocacy address a racialized system?
3. To what degree does this advocacy aim to achieve an outcome aligned with our strategic focus and values?
4. To what degree is this advocacy community-led?
5. To what degree would this work require us to use our specialized expertise (class action, policy, nonduplicative of others)?

As a result of this close analysis, our current work on some issues will shift to align with our new strategic focus. **We will be reaching out to our Alliance and community partners in the coming weeks to discuss how to best work together as we transition some of our current advocacy.** We hope that, together, we will transform CLS into a more impactful, nimble, and community-based organization going forward.

We will either not continue the advocacy listed below or we will engage in the work only to the extent it impacts our mass incarceration or immigration work:

- Consumer or foreclosure
- Education
- Foster care
- Housing and homelessness advocacy
- Public benefits advocacy
- Senior specific work (end of 2019)
- Reentry clinic and individual reentry work
- No individual cases, with very limited exceptions:
 1. CLS may take individual cases when they are related to a larger systemic effort (the two systems we are focusing on) and provide an investigative or professional development opportunity.
 2. CLS works with partner agencies to ensure there are no other resources available, and the cases otherwise meet our strategy screen.

We will take on some limited proactive Alliance partner or community requests on issues that may not touch on our two priority communities where the need is critical and no one else can do it. In such cases, we will utilize our advocacy criteria listed above to inform our decisions. Over the next two months we are creating a work plan to prioritize work within our strategic focus on people impacted by the broken immigration system and mass incarceration. We will share that document when it's complete.

Thank you for helping us move forward in a more focused, strategic, and impactful way so, together, we can achieve justice and equity for all.