

Racial Justice Action Plan

The National Legal Aid and Defender Association (NLADA) leads a broad network of advocates on the frontlines to advance justice and expand opportunity for all by promoting excellence in the delivery of legal services for people who cannot afford counsel. At the heart of this work are our values of diversity, equality, and inclusion – a recognition that the principle of racial equity must be present in our hiring decisions, in our practice, and in our engagement with our communities.

We do not conflate poverty with racism. To say that because the majority of our clients are persons of color,¹ we necessarily perform racial justice work would be to simplify the difficult issues of poverty, racial injustice, and racial injustice that flows from poverty. These issues are neither proxies for one another nor are they mutually exclusive.² In fact, the connection between the two is longstanding and deeply rooted in American history.

In commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Kerner Commission’s Report and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are reminded that economic and racial justice have long been connected and that one cannot be achieved while leaving the other behind. Dr. King’s words should push us forward in our work to secure justice and promote equality: “[M]ankind’s survival is dependent on man’s ability to solve the problems of racial injustice, poverty, and war; the solution of these problems is in turn dependent upon man’s squaring his moral progress with his scientific progress, and learning the practical art of living in harmony.”³

NLADA always recognized the importance of racial justice in its activities and the work of its members. Our joint statement on racial justice with the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law and our Fight Against Implicit Bias and Racial Inequality Pledge are our most recent steps to more clearly acknowledge that our work to provide access to justice for people who cannot afford counsel is advanced through our efforts to promote racial justice. This action plan is intended to propel this work forward and commits NLADA and its members to: (1) speak with clarity about poverty and racial equity; (2) improve our internal governance to reflect the racial equity we seek to secure in our communities; and (3) support a purpose-driven practice that employs strategic advocacy to advance racial justice in our communities.

¹ The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans at 18 (June 2017): “Forty-four percent of Americans with family incomes below 125% of FPL identify themselves as white and claim no Hispanic origin. Another 28% identify as Hispanic, and 21% identify as black with no Hispanic origin. Four percent identify as Asian, 1% as American Indian, 8% as another race, and 4% as two or more races.”

² Francisca D. Fajana and Camille D. Holmes, “Advancing Racial Equity – A Legal Services Imperative,” 47 Clearinghouse Review: Journal of Poverty Law and Policy, 139, 143 (Sept. - Oct. 2013).

³ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Quest for Peace and Justice,” Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1964.

1. Speaking With Clarity

We pledge to speak with clarity on racial justice. Our joint statement with the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law in July 2016 is but one example of this commitment. We will continue to use clear language on the need for racial justice in all of our work and ensure that there is no question that we stand in solidarity with the Black community and other communities of color and against the racial inequality that still plagues our nation.

We will further this work by taking the following steps:

Proposed immediate action in next six months

- Review public statements and messaging, such as mission statement and website, to add and/or clarify racial justice language
- NLADA will develop an online platform with our statements and resources on access to justice and racial justice

Proposed further action in 2019

- NLADA will create a communications tool for legal aid and public defender offices to assist them with speaking authoritatively on the importance of racial and economic justice
- NLADA will launch the online platform of racial justice resources for members and the public

Proposed ongoing action

- Ensure public statements and messaging are clear on racial justice
- NLADA will maintain a communications tool for legal aid and public defender offices to assist them with speaking authoritatively on the importance of racial and economic justice
- NLADA will maintain the online platform of racial justice resources for members and the public



2. Practicing What We Preach

We pledge to practice what we preach. NLADA proposes to assist its members with ensuring a respectful and inclusive home for all its staff and clients. As a membership organization of equal justice organizations, the goal of ensuring fair and inclusive organizations has always been at the heart of NLADA's work.

The recognition of the importance of self-assessment resulted in the adoption of the Fight Against Implicit Bias and Racial Inequality (FAIR) Pledge by NLADA's Client Policy Group and subsequently its Board of Directors in the summer of 2017. The pledge commits signatories "to take steps toward confronting our own biases, to improve our capacity to effectively serve clients and to positively advance racial justice."

We will further this work by taking the following steps:

Proposed immediate action in in six months

- Promote and implement the Fight Against Implicit Bias and Racial Inequality (FAIR) Pledge
- Implement a process to require all staff to take Harvard's Implicit Association Test
- Recruit diverse staff and promote their inclusion and advancement
- Create strong partnerships within the community to build pipeline for diversity and inclusion within the legal profession
- Designate a diversity officer from among staff or create a racial justice fellowship to lead this work
- Gather and transfer previously prepared resources to NLADA's online platform of racial justice resources
- Complete an annual self-evaluation on progress in advancing racial justice

Proposed ongoing action

- Recruit diverse staff and promote their inclusion and advancement
- Create strong partnerships within the community to build pipeline for diversity and inclusion within the legal profession
- Implement implicit bias staff trainings and for organizational leaders
- Complete an annual self-evaluation on progress in advancing racial justice



3. Supporting our Clients

We will support our clients in achieving racial and economic justice. We will do this by examining our programs and strategies to systematically fight racial injustice. This will include programs we design to improve our advocacy and strategies we employ in our advocacy. We will also engage our communities and learn about their experiences to inform our approach to promote racial justice.

We will further this work by taking the following steps:

Proposed immediate action in next six months

- Identify where racial justice is implicit in ongoing programmatic work and ensure that the messaging associated with that work is clear
- Identify where principle of racial equity should be more explicitly added to existing programmatic work
- Identify opportunities to engage with our communities around systemic change to end economic and racial injustice
- NLADA will promote peer-to-peer learning among legal aid and public defender offices on ways to advance racial justice legal strategies and gather and transfer previously prepared resources to online platform of racial justice resources

Proposed ongoing action

- Identify opportunities where principle of racial justice can be explicitly added to new programmatic work, including work done in cooperation with other access to justice stakeholders like the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law and Access to Justice Commissions
- Identify opportunities to engage with our communities (including community organizations) around systemic change to end economic and racial injustice
- NLADA will promote peer-to-peer learning among legal aid and public defender offices on ways to advance racial justice legal strategies and gather and transfer previously prepared resources to the online platform of racial justice resources

