



## Introduction from the Director of the Center for Social Justice

On behalf of the Center for Social Justice, I am pleased to present this Strategic Action Plan to move the work of the Center forward over the next two years. Since its launch in the spring of 2019, the Center has achieved great success in accomplishing its mission of advancing justice through research, education, advocacy, innovation, and public engagement. As we approach our two-year anniversary this spring, I am confident that we will be able to build on our early momentum and grow the Center into a preeminent hub for social justice in our community and beyond.

Two strategies will be critical to our ability to accomplish this vision: innovation and collaboration. Indeed, even drafting a strategic plan during COVID-19—in the midst of the greatest public health emergency the United States has experienced in at least 100 years—has been difficult. The challenge of not knowing what next month (let alone next year) will look like, is daunting. And yet, the pandemic has also afforded us many unprecedented opportunities:

- x by going virtual this year, we were able to broadcast our programming to those far and wide, routinely garnering audiences of more than 500 attendees at Center events;
- x we were able to quickly pivot to focus in nearly real time on the important social justice implications of both COVID-19 and the renewed racial justice calls to action following the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, David McAtee, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and all the others who have lost their lives at the hands of the police and as a result of racially motivated violence;
- x we mobilized rapid legal responses to COVID-19 with funding from MassMutual that supported faculty members and students pursuing meaningful social justice work; and
- x we have been working with others to establish technology access points for individuals in our community who now face an immense digital divide that prevents access to the courts, healthcare, schools, community centers, and so much more.

Part of our success has been a commitment to innovation—to adapting, as we must, to the new way of the world. The late Supreme Judicial Court Chief Justice Ralph D. Gants, a tireless advocate for access to justice who passed away earlier this year, assured those in the legal field that virtual court is here to stay. There is simply no going back to “normal.” With that knowledge, the experience of navigating these past nine months, and the many conversations held as part of the strategic planning process, we determined that innovation should be added as one of the key aspects of our mission statement. It has served us well so far, and will undeniably do so as we navigate our future.

The other key component thus far has been intentional, strategic, and robust collaboration. We strongly believe that together, we can do more, and do better for others. This has certainly been true of our relationship with Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company (“MassMutual”), which came on board in spring 2020 as our primary funder – supporting the Center’s work with not only incredibly generous financial contributions that have allowed the Center to thrive, but also with support from volunteers, their Law Department Pro Bono Committee’s support and guidance, and collaboration with their Community Responsibility team and Foundation to invest in programming to benefit the citizens of Springfield who most need our help. It is a remarkable partnership, and one that we hope to replicate with others across the region and state.

We are also grateful for the other donors, supporters, and partners that we’ve been able to develop over the past two years, including Shatz, Schwartz and Fentin P.C. who contributed the Center’s first major donation, and all who donated to the Bruce Miller Social Justice Scholarship, which achieved its endowment goal this fall. We could not do this work without the support of so many in our community, across campus, and among our partners, and are deeply grateful to be engaging in this work with you.

**Thank you for joining us!**

Ariel R. Clemmer, Esq.

# THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Center for Social Justice (Center or CSJ) engaged in a robust, multifaceted listening tour from March to October 2020. Center Director Ariel Clemmer spoke with internal, external, and key justice stakeholders from across the University and the region during this creative visioning process. These meetings included Law School faculty, staff, and students; student group leaders; community partners; alumni; potential and actual funders; city officials; and University administrators, faculty, students, and staff. The Center also has had regular communications with its two Law School faculty advisors, Harris Freeman and Lauren Carasik, and Dean Sudha Setty.

The central questions sought to understand what the Center currently is, can be, and should do as we look to the future. These conversations included:

- Identifying the Center's institutional strengths (including faculty expertise, Law School/ University resources, and regional dominance)
- Seeking input on the future potential of the CSJ
- Identifying ongoing needs and challenges, and
- Developing concrete ideas and strategies to strengthen and institutionalize the Center as a key initiative of the Law School and University.

At the end of October 2020, Director Clemmer presented a draft strategic plan to the Law School faculty. Discussion was held at the October 30, 2020 faculty meeting, after which a revised draft was created and disseminated to all members of the Law School community for additional comment in November 2020. The finalized plan was presented to external stakeholders, including funders and partners of the Center, in December 2020.



Launched in 2019, the **Center for Social Justice** strengthens collaborative efforts between the Law School and the region to work toward a more just, equitable, and inclusive society.

# OUR MISSION

Advancing social justice through research, education, advocacy, innovation, and public engagement.

# OUR VISION

The Center provides a cohesive hub for the Law School’s justice-related teaching, scholarship, and service. We also broaden social justice academic offerings, help students aspiring to be social justice lawyers achieve their goals, imbue a culture of pro bono volunteerism in students, faculty, and other legal professionals, manage in-house pro bono projects, and work closely with community organizations and partners to identify and address unmet needs that require a multi-dimensional response cutting across law and other fields.

We aim to be a preeminent Center for Social Justice—locally, regionally, and nationally—that works to understand and address the root causes of social injustice and develop innovative, human-centered solutions for change.

Through cooperation, communication, and collaboration, the CSJ seeks

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# WHAT WE DO

We effectuate our mission and vision through five primary avenues: research, education, advocacy, innovation, and public engagement.



## Current Projects and Initiatives

### Pro Bono Opportunities:

- x Racial Justice Court Project (RJCP): partnership with the Committee for Public Counsel Services (CPCS) and local family court attorneys, we are exploring the issues of racially disparate sentencing outcomes and overall involvement in the court system for people of color in our community. This project is largely data driven and research/writing based.
- x Consumer Debt Initiative: 50% of people with a credit bureau record living in communities of color in Hampden County have a debt in collection. This pro bono program assists consumers facing small claims credit card collection actions in the Springfield District Court. We interview and counsel clients, negotiate with opposing counsel, and litigate trials while fighting for justice against the powerhouse debt collection industry.
- x Access to Technology Centers: lack of technology is the greatest barrier to access to justice in our time. Litigants now need specific technology access, applications, and capacity to “enter” the courthouse’s (now virtual) front door. We are engaging students and other volunteers to be part of the solution by working on community based technology access centers in partnership with other system stakeholders.
- x Independent Pro Bono Projects: when students are passionate about a particular issue we help them to make it happen so they can go on to change the world.

- x National Expungement Week Sealing and Expungement Clinics: The CSJ has partnered with local grassroots organizers and other legal entities to provide a combination of legal information and advice, one and fee reduction, education, and other wraparound services needed by individuals and communities harmed by the war on drugs. We plan to continue these clinics several times per year and have ongoing pro bono representation through students and other volunteers.

### Externships, Internships, and Fellowships

- x We are always excited to host students in these roles and do so throughout the academic year and summer. We also help provide stipends and connections to students pursuing social justice externships, internships, and fellowships external to the university.

### Other Social Justice Work

- x We are involved in a number of other projects, events, conferences, and conversations happening at the Law School and in the community. These include our ongoing social justice webinars and programming, such as our recent speaker series addressing COVID-19’s disproportionate impact on communities of color and lower income households. We also support a GPCS Children and Family Law Division Pipeline Program, the Western Massachusetts Remote Immigration Assistance Project partnership an ACLU Hotline, and sponsor the Northeast Region Fair Housing & Civil Rights Conference

# OUR FOCUS AREAS

In recognition of the intersected nature of many social

# OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Center had significant accomplishments in its first year. We developed innovative initiatives and robust partnerships across the campus and in our community. Some highlights include:

- x As a result of successful fundraising, the Center was able to hire a full-time director, attorney Ariel Clemmer, in March 2020, which has greatly expanded our capacity and ability to fulfill our mission, vision1.3730k(n)-12.2droz0T0.005 T9-3.2 (c)-g11.8 7abils

# Where We Are Going

## OUR GOALS & OBJECTIVES

### **GOAL 1: CONTINUE DEVELOPING KEY PROGRAMMING & INITIATIVES**

To accomplish our goal of becoming a preeminent social justice center locally, regionally, and nationally, we will continue to develop essential programming and initiatives across our five key avenues of research,

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offer. We will do so by building awareness of the CSJ on campus,  
publicize

**We deeply appreciate our supporters, partners,  
funders, donors, volunteers, and community at WNEU and in the region.**

## **CONNECT WITH US!**

For more information about the Center for Social Justice,  
our upcoming events, or becoming a supporter,  
visit our website or contact us at:

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