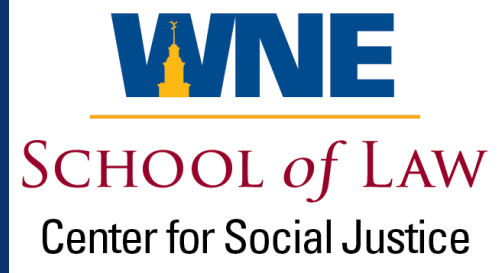


ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021



The Center for Social Justice

Western New England University School of Law
Ariel R. Clemmer, Director



INTRODUCTION FROM OUR DIRECTOR

I am pleased to present our 2020-2021 Annual Report. Since its launch in the spring of 2019, the Center for Social Justice (Center or CSJ) has achieved remarkable success accomplishing its mission of *advancing justice through research, education, advocacy, innovation, and public engagement*. I am confident that we will build on our early momentum and grow the Center into a **preeminent hub for social justice in our community and beyond**.

Operating a relatively new entity during COVID-19—amid the greatest public health emergency the United States has experienced in at least 100 years—has been difficult. The challenge of not knowing what lies ahead, is daunting. And yet, the pandemic has also afforded us many unique opportunities:

- by going virtual last year, we were able to broadcast our programming to those far and wide, routinely garnering audiences of more than 500 attendees at Center events;
- we were able to quickly pivot to focus in 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 the others who lost their lives at the hands of the police and as a result of racially motivated violence;
- we mobilized rapid legal responses to COVID-19 with funding from MassMutual that supported faculty members and students pursuing meaningful social justice work; and
- 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.

Two strategies will be critical to our continued growth: innovation and collaboration. 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 in September 2020, assured those in the legal field that virtual court is here to stay. There is simply no going back to “normal.” With that knowledge, and our experience navigating today’s online legal world, we determined that innovation should be added as one of the key elements in our mission statement. Our work is cutting edge – now and looking ahead.

The other essential component 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 supports the Center’s work with not only incredibly generous financial contributions, 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 have been able to develop over the past two years. We could not do this work without the help of so many in our community, and are deeply grateful to be engaging in this work with you.

Thank you for joining us!

Ariel R. Clemmer, Esq.

A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR 2021- 2022

From March to October 2020, the Center engaged in a robust, multifaceted listening tour leading up to the creation of its first strategic plan. 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 CSJ partners, in December 2020. A copy is available on the Impact tab of our [website](#).

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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

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.***



OUR PRIMARY AVENUES

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



The CSJ seeks to advance, enhance, and support this by:

- ❖ Enriching the University's and Law School's intellectual community and promoting interdisciplinary, synergistic projects rooted in social justice.
- ❖ Generating expanded opportunities for student involvement in advocacy, research, and CSJ programming.
- ❖ Supporting innovative conversation, research, scholarship, and pedagogy of those whose work aligns with our mission.
- ❖ Developing relationships and partnerships with other like-minded organizations in our community.
- ❖ Supporting the Law School's public engagement efforts to provide popular legal education and pro bono services to those in need.
- ❖ Supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion and anti-racism efforts across the University and Law School, including through pipeline programming designed to diversify the student body.

CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVES

The CSJ has grown tremendously in the past year. In addition to our social justice programming, we provided, for the first time in 2020-2021, the following in-house pro bono initiatives:

Sealing and Expungement Initiative: The CSJ has partnered with local nonprofits, community members, grassroots organizers, and cannabis-industry players on our sealing and expungement (racial and economic justice) initiative intended to address the harms caused to people of color from the war on drugs. On September 30, 2020, and April 29, 2021, we hosted Know Your Rights events for the public and provided pro bono assistance to those who wanted legal help. At our spring 2021 event, every participant was able to receive assistance, including obtaining a copy of their CORI report, one-on-one consultation with an attorney, preparation of and help filing Petitions to Seal and/or Expunge, and brief legal advice. Our legal volunteers were trained by recent Adams Award winner and Access to Justice Fellow Crispin Birnbaum. This virtual event proved to be incredibly complex and was highly successful. We could not have done it without the assistance of our community partners, members of the private bar, law students, and volunteers from Mass Mutual, along with our event sponsors. Our next event will be Spring 2022.



Virtual Court User Experience Survey/Observation Project: An innovative observation/research-based project in which the CSJ and Suffolk University Professor Benjamin Golden worked with student volunteers over winter break and spring term to understand the challenges and successes of virtual Zoom court from a self-represented litigant perspective. Volunteers observed virtual court sessions, recorded data, interviewed litigants, and contributed to a report being drafted by the Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice that will attempt to change policy and practice by judges and magistrates across the state.

Consumer Debt Initiative (CDI): Over 50% of people in Hampden County neighborhoods of color have a debt in collection, and Springfield has the highest volume of debt cases across the state in our courts. In addition, the outcome of a debt collection proceeding has a significant impact on a person's ability to get loans, rent an apartment, and provide for their family. The CDI, funded by the MassMutual Foundation as part of its Live Mutual Project, is the CSJ's busiest program in which volunteers assist defendants facing wrongful credit card collection actions in virtual Small Claims Zoom sessions at the Springfield District Court.

CDI volunteers fight for justice against the powerhouse debt collection industry while helping clients understand their legal rights and connecting them to financial literacy and other holistic resources. Among other things, volunteers attend court, conduct client intakes, negotiate settlements, seek dismissals based on economic hardship of the defendant, and even go to "trial" in a Small Claims hearing when needed. **This initiative has served an impressive 223 defendants in the first seven months since the courts reopened (virtually) in late September 2020.**

The Cost of Gun Violence in Springfield: this project examines the cost of gun violence in our city in collaboration with a local activist group, Greater Springfield Nonviolence. Our research will generate a proposal to the city council and mayor asking for changes in the allocation of anti-violence funds.

Racial Justice Sentencing Project(s): the CSJ has joined in partnership with both CPCS and several private Children and Family Law attorneys to explore the issues of racially disparate sentencing outcomes and court involvement for people of color in our community. These projects are data-driven and research-based and involve drafting a forthcoming report of findings and recommendations for change.

Addressing Racism as a Social Determinant of Health through Restorative Racial Healing Dialogue: the CSJ was awarded a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging grant by Health New England to pilot a two-part program, launching this summer, designed to (1) educate the WNEU community about the connection between racism and health disparities, as well as the structural barriers to equity that exist across society; and (2) facilitate racial healing and relationship-building between and among our institution and the local community through restorative justice healing circle conversations.

Independent Pro Bono Project: students are always welcome to pursue pro bono projects independently with the CSJ. In the past year, we hosted several students researching pipeline initiative best practices, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion projects.

Social Media and Website Volunteers: we are lucky to have several marketing and communications volunteers throughout the year who help to promote the CSJ's important work through our new website and social media accounts. If you have not yet, make sure to like and follow the CSJ on twitter, Instagram, and Facebook!



Mock Trial High School Students with U.S. District Court Judge Mark G. Mastroianni (Law '89). Center Staff Attorney Jessica Marcellino participated as a guest juror at the event.

CENTER FOCUS AREAS

In recognition of the intersected nature of many social justice issues, we have adopted a holistic approach to the substantive focus areas of the Center's work. These include:

Access to Justice and Technology



Racial and Restorative Justice



Economic Justice



Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and Pipeline Project Support



LGBTQ+ Rights



Immigrants' Rights



Civil and Human Rights



OUR IMPACT



Consumer Debt Initiative:

70% of clients are low-income women of color

Our Volunteers:

We had 225 total volunteers (194 unique volunteers)

Funding:

Raised \$802,000 in grant funding since May 2020

CSJ PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

We hosted and co-sponsored several well-attended events recently, including:

- Gervino-Ward LGBTQ+ Speaker Series *Evan Wolfson: founder of Freedom to Marry—the successful campaign for marriage equality in the United States*
- *The Color of Life in a Time of Crisis: Thinking Through Racial Disparities During COVID-19*
- *From the Courthouse to the Streets: Lawyering in the Time of Black Lives Matter*
- *Big Dirty Money: The Shocking Injustice and Unseen Cost of White-Collar Crime with Professor Jennifer Taub*
- *Lessons from the Pleasure and Power of Black Music in the age of Hip Hop*
- Clason Speaker Series Lecture, Shoba Sivaprasad Wadhia: *Banned: Immigration Enforcement in the Time of Trump*
- A conversation with Black Panther Party Chairman Elaine Brown
- Dr. Vicki Vernon Lott, *The Legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*
- *Pathway to Judgeship*-A National Association of Women Judges panel hosted by the CSJ and WLA
- *Intersection of Law and Occupational Therapy: Disability Rights* panel co-hosted with COTAD
- CSJ movie nights: *Just Mercy* and *Judas and the Black Messiah*

We also provided the following trainings:

- CDI Basics and Advanced Level Trainings
- Massachusetts Expungement and Sealing Trainings
- National Lawyers Guild Legal Observer Training



OUR STAFF

We are so grateful to our amazing CSJ team:

Ariel R. Clemmer, Director
Jessica L. Marcellino, Staff Attorney
Keshini Soboron, IC/Legal Fellow
Nate Bench, Spring 2021 Extern

Sudha Setty, Law School Dean
Harris Freeman, CSJ Faculty Advisor
Lauren Carasik, CSJ Faculty Advisor

Aubrey Foy, Administrative Assistant
Dale Marie Dahlke, Law School Operations Officer
Marie Fletcher, Clinical Programs Administrator

The Center welcomed our newest team member, Staff Attorney Jessica Marcellino, in March 2021. Jessica graduated from WNE Law School in 2012 as a Public Interest Scholar. Her law school and professional experience centered on assisting those in need including positions with: CPCS Public Defenders, Superior Court; Law Clerk for the Springfield Housing Authority; and, finally Plaintiff's counsel at a private injury firm in Springfield MA for seven years prior to joining the CSJ.

Jessica will oversee client-facing initiatives and serve as the lead attorney of our free legal services programs. We are lucky to have her on board!

MASS MUTUAL

None of our success would be possible without the funding and pro-bono volunteer efforts by our primary supporter, MassMutual. In addition to providing critical financial backing, many MassMutual employees make the time to join the CSJ in its mission to impact the community by volunteering in many of our programs, initiatives, and trainings! We thank the following employees who joined us this past year:

Abigail Dejnak	Dennis Stempel	Lori King
Adam Schwartz	Dianne Rizzo	Martha Miller
Alison Miller	Dmitry Polonskiy	Melissa Fennell
Alison Weiss	*Dorothy Varon	*Michael O'Connor
Alison Wynn	Edwin Kerr	Michelle Faucher
Alyssa O'Connor	Elizabeth Dillon	Nancy Marafioti
Amanda Bannikov	Jennifer Lewis	Pamela Harnois
Al Kingan	Joan Nemirow Benn	Pamela Sinofsky
Barbara Hough	Joanna Bradway	Patrice Sabach
Ellen Rawson	John O'Neil	Patrick Creegan
Bernadette Harrigan	Joseph Morledge	Rachelle Beaulieu
Catherine Baatz	Julie Shields	Robin Fasoli
Cathleen Bradlee	Kamala Brunnett	*Sucharita Varanasi
Christina Brodeur	Kerianne Fortin	Susan Senecal
Christine Juhasz	Kylie Demears	Susana Marques
Christopher Markowski	Bruce Tannahill	*Law Department's Pro Bono Committee
Dawn Benoit	Laura Lally	*MassMutual Foundation
Deborah Nebel	Tonya Bradford	
Debra Ashley	Leslie Langford	

* Special thanks to these individuals and teams for their extensive, ongoing support of the CSJ.

FUNDERS/SPONSORS/DONORS

Our funders, sponsors, and donors greatly elevate the level of impact we are able to have on our community. Thank you so much:

MassMutual Law Department's Pro Bono Committee

MassMutual Foundation

Health New England

Woman's Fund of Western Massachusetts

LSAC

and our many generous donors for all your support!



COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

We are grateful for the support of our many local community partners, including:



∴ MassMutual



VOLUNTEERS

We greatly appreciate each of our volunteers. While we haven't listed all 194 of our 2020-2021 unique volunteers here, they are listed in the [End of Year Celebration Event program](#) on our website.



We are honored to work with you to *advance social justice through research, advocacy, education, innovation, and public engagement.*

