Center for Law and Justice

Eliminating the Gap Between Law and Justice

2018 ANNUAL REPORT
From the Director – 2018 Annual Report

It continues to be a pleasure and a privilege to serve our community as the Executive Director of the Center for Law and Justice. My deep commitment to equity and justice provides the energy and inspiration that I need to continue. Also, as Director, I am given the distinct honor and pleasure of working with an equally committed staff of people willing to go beyond the call of duty to help those in need whenever they are called upon to do so. We struggle, supported by wonderful student interns and volunteers, to effectively advocate for human rights and provide useful information, a variety of needed human and legal services and basic crisis intervention services, to an increasing number of community residents. Our work also involves seeking appropriate transformative changes in institutional policies and practices that are thought to do harm to our clients.

In 2018, the Center increased its collaboration with other community groups to work for changes in criminal justice, the delivery of health care services, and public safety efforts. Those involved groups and organizations included the Albany Medical College, Drug Policy Alliance, Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice, LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion), and local grass roots organizations and colleges.

Unfortunately, in mid-year, the Center was faced with a major case involving the police shooting of a 19-year old Black male. The case raised numerous questions and concerns that forced the Center to increase its community organizing and community engagement efforts. We sponsored community meetings, produced a written report critical of an official investigation, urged policy changes in the district attorney’s office and the state legislature, and provided a broad range of support services to the shooting victim and his family. Our involvement was extremely taxing and demanding, but necessary to serve the needs of the young client.

We ended the year even more determined to find new ways to bring about transformative change in vital community institutions that so many of our low-income and residents of color depend upon. We will also seek to empower our constituent population by teaching them how to engage in successful self-advocacy work so that they can assess and demand quality services on their own.

I invite you to read and examine this report not only to learn more about the Center’s work in 2018, but to learn of our plans for the coming year, to offer us your ideas and suggestions for improving the Center’s work, and to join us as we seek important policy changes that can lead to equity and justice for all.
Our Mission

The Center for Law and Justice envisions a peaceful, just and compassionate community and works to ensure, through advocacy and programs that each resident is provided access to the goods, services and opportunities of that community. It also works to establish the fair and just treatment of all people throughout the civil and criminal justice systems, and works to reduce reliance upon incarceration.

The Center for Law and Justice works in several key areas:

- Client Service and Referrals
- Advocacy and Public Education
- Supporting the Community

Client Service and Referrals

The Center takes calls Monday through Friday from community members seeking help with issues such as criminal justice, discrimination, housing, social services, post-incarceration challenges, and health care. Center staff members provide referrals to community resources and advocacy services on a daily basis. Interventions are sometimes made with agencies when appropriate and requested. Appointments are also scheduled for free services provided on Thursday Service Day, including legal information and health system navigation. In 2018 there were 873 direct services and referrals provided by Center staff.
Legal information is provided by a volunteer attorney and includes criminal, civil, family court, discrimination, and probate information. In 2018 there were 316 appointments for legal information.

Health system navigation is provided by Albany Medical College students and UAlbany School of Public Health students, under supervision from the AMC Office of Community Engagement. This includes help with insurance enrollment, using health insurance, finding a doctor, making appointments, and any other issues in obtaining health care. In 2018 there were 38 appointments for health care matters.
The Center sometimes puts extraordinary effort into helping clients, as was the case with **Ellazar Williams.** Mr. Williams was shot in the back by an Albany police detective in August 2018. The shooting left him permanently paralyzed from the chest down and in a wheelchair. In addition to advocating for a just investigation of the incident (see below under Advocacy), the Center gave direct aid and support to Mr. Williams and his family due to the severe injury caused by the shooting and his related medical needs. The Center also took the lead in community fund raising for the family.

**Advocacy and Public Education**

**Legislative Work**
In partnership with other organizations such as Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice, the Drug Policy Alliance, and LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion), the Center advocated for:

- Reform of marijuana laws
- Criminal Justice reform of the bail system and discovery evidence
- Changes in NYS law section 50a that shields records of police officers

**Capital Region Connections**

The Center produces and distributes this guide for residents of the Capital District and people formerly detained in jail or prison. *Connections* (formerly *On Your Own*) is a valuable resource for those reentering the community after being incarcerated, as well as for anyone trying to navigate the Capital Region’s human services.

*Connections* provides information on the following:
- Parole
- Education
- Financial assistance
- Voting
- Housing
- Veterans benefits
- Food pantries
- Senior citizen resources
- Health care
- Legal resources
- Finding a job
- Community resources
- NYS prison system
- Probation and conditional discharge
- Courts
- Sex offender regulations

Copies of *Connections* are available free of charge. Printed copies can be picked up in person from the CFLJ office and are also mailed upon request to individuals currently in prison. An electronic version can be found on the CFLJ’s website. The Center distributed 1,687 print copies of *Connections* by the end of 2018.
Know Your Rights Workshops
In partnership with the City of Albany’s Summer Youth Employment Program and the Albany Police Department, the Center organizes and delivers workshops to high school students to educate them on their rights and responsibilities when coming in contact with the police. Sessions are co-facilitated by both an attorney and a police officer, thereby providing participants with an invaluable blend of perspectives and expertise. The workshops cover one’s legal rights and responsibilities during vehicle stops and searches, “stop and frisks” on the street, and house searches. Workshops for other community groups may be requested through the Center’s website.

Media Coverage
The Center’s Executive Director, Dr. Alice Green, is often the “go to person” for the media on issues pertaining to criminal justice and law enforcement. As a result, she helps to educate the community on these issues and has written and spoken on topics during 2018 that included LEAD, Police/Community Relations, Racism, the Ellazar case, Public Safety, female incarceration, educational films, and Criminal Justice legislation.

Albany City and County Law Enforcement
The Center advocated for a fair and impartial hearing in the case of Ellazar Williams, who was shot in the back by an Albany police detective in August 2018 while running away. Mr. Williams was being chased by police responding to a report of a man with a gun at a convenience store. Williams was not found with a gun, although police reported finding a knife nearby.
A video recording of the event and community outrage led to a grand jury considering charges against the officer who shot Mr. Williams. The Center urged the County Prosecutor to recuse himself from the case due to a conflict of interest. That did not happen, and the grand jury did not bring charges against the officer, who subsequently retired. Although Mr. Williams was initially charged with menacing an officer and criminal possession of a weapon, those charges were later dropped. The officer’s bullet lodged in Mr. Williams’ spine and left him paralyzed from the chest down.

Supporting the Community

Black History Month Film Series
Each February the Center sponsors a film series celebrating Black History Month, in partnership with the African American Cultural Center and the Albany Housing Authority. Films are free to the public and include a discussion after each film. 2018 films included Pull Gravity, and MLK: The Assassination Tapes.

Voting Rights and Voter Registration
The Center delivers presentations on voting rights and sponsors voter registration drives. As part of its voting rights initiative, the Center seeks to educate those who are currently detained in local county jails and correctional facilities, those with a criminal conviction, and the community at large about their rights to register to vote. In 2018 the Center delivered two community education sessions as well as visited Albany County Jail to inform those detained of their right to vote.
**Help with Food and Heating Needs**
The Center provides a limited number of grocery gift cards and heating assistance to needy households during the winter, including help applying for the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP). The Center also partners with Soul Fire Farms to distribute fresh vegetables to Center clients during the growing season.

**HEAL Community Cookout**
Each August, the Center for Law and Justice hosts a community cookout to highlight the Center’s work as part of its HEAL (Health, Education, Advocacy, and LEAD) initiative, and provides community members a chance to network with other organizations that offer resources related to health, housing, legal, and civil rights issues. In 2018, participating organizations included Trinity Alliance of the Capital Region, Legal Aid, Citizen Action Network, BOCES Literacy Zone, SUNY Attain Lab, City of Albany Youth Office, City of Albany Department of Youth and Workforce services, The Red Book Shelf, Addictions Care Center of Albany, City of Albany Police Department (LEAD), and Citizens Police Review Board. Food from the grill as well as salads and beverages are provided free to community members who attend. Students from Albany Medical College volunteer to help CFLJ staff and interns as they set up and run the event.

**Supporting the City of Albany**
The Center’s Executive Director, Dr. Alice Green, participated in the selection process for a new Albany Police Chief at the request of Mayor Kathy Sheehan. Chief Eric Hawkins was hired following a nationwide search and began serving in August 2018. Dr. Green is also a member of the LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion) Policy Coordinating Group, which reviews and provides feedback on protocols. The group also approves Request for Proposals for service providers and program evaluators.
New Jim Crow Study Group
Meetings are held every second Monday of the month to discuss issues related to Michelle Alexander’s book, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. The New Jim Crow is a stunning account of the rebirth of a caste-like system in the United States, one that has resulted in millions of African Americans locked behind bars and then relegated to a permanent second-class status—denied the very rights supposedly won in the Civil Rights Movement. Jim Crow laws were wiped off the books decades ago, but today an extraordinary percentage of the African American community is warehoused in prisons or trapped in a parallel social universe, denied basic civil and human rights—including the right to vote; the right to serve on juries; and the right to be free of legal discrimination in employment, housing, access to education and public benefits. Alexander shows that, by targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control, even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness.

Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion
The Center participates in Albany’s Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, which is a community-based police diversion approach with the goals of improving public safety and public order, and reducing unnecessary justice system involvement of people who participate in the program. The people who participate may become involved in the criminal justice system because of addiction, mental illness, homelessness, and poverty. Police officers exercise discretionary authority to divert individuals to a community-based, harm-reduction intervention for law violations driven by unmet behavioral health needs. In lieu of the normal criminal justice system, individuals are instead referred into a trauma-informed intensive case-management program where the individual receives a wide range of support services, often including transitional and permanent housing and/or drug treatment. LEAD was first implemented in Seattle in 2011, and has since been replicated in Albany as well as 37 other municipalities throughout the country. Dr. Green and The Center for Law and Justice were instrumental in bringing LEAD to Albany in 2016, in partnership with Albany City and County. The Center continues to sit on the Policy Planning Committee and the Operations Work Group of Albany’s LEAD program, and supports the Community Leadership Team. Dr. Green also meets with people from other regions who are looking into adopting LEAD in their communities.

Felony Diversion Program
This program, sponsored by the Albany County District Attorney, focuses on the diversion of non-violent felony offenses committed by young adults at the time of initial prosecution. With the goal of reverse engineering the flow of young offenders away from a criminal conviction, the Felony Youth Diversion Program is a case resolution option for young adults age 16 to 24 charged with certain non-violent felony offenses. The Center’s Executive Director, Dr. Alice Green, is part of a panel of community members who sit on a Diversion
Board, where eligible participants are offered the opportunity to take accountability for criminal wrongdoing and repair harm to any victimized party, without a felony criminal conviction or time served in State Prison. With the implementation of “Raise the Age” in October 2018, offenders aged 16 and 17 appear before a special Youth Part, and the original model continues to operate with offenders age 18 through 24.

Financial Information

The Center for Law and Justice is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit organization that is required to file a Form 990 annual report on its financial status. That report is a public document available for examination.

The work of the CFLJ is made possible due in large part to volunteers and private donors. In 2018, the Center contracted with the City of Albany to provide education and outreach services to community members. The City’s funding for these LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion) services was provided by the federally-funded Community Development Block Grant.

Volunteer assistance is provided to CFLJ by private citizens, local attorneys, and a diverse group of student interns from colleges and universities. Many of the Center’s student interns came from Albany Medical College and the University at Albany.

During 2018, financial donations to the Center came from individuals, foundations, and community grants including:

Tides Foundation
Drug Policy Alliance
Alice Moore Foundation
Carl Touhey Foundation
Community Development Block Grant
Lila Touhey

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