The Center for Law and Justice

Annual Report
2012
Report prepared by Sara Morby, Student Intern
INTRODUCTION
This year was ushered in with a somber reminder of the Center’s founding. The Center for Law and Justice was founded twenty-seven years ago in response to prevailing police brutality, which exacerbated with the police killing of Jessie Davis, a young African American man. This devastating moment marked a pivotal point in the deteriorating relationship between the Albany police department and the African-American community. The Center for Law and Justice was founded in 1985 in wake of the community outrage that followed this series of events. The Center helped keep the case before the public, gave moral support to the Davis family, assisted attorneys with a federal lawsuit against the city, and organized community demonstrations and fundraising events to cover legal expenses related to the family’s suit.

On December 29, 2011, another police shooting resulted in the death of a young, African American man, Nah-Cream Moore. While the circumstances of the two incidents varied, the result was the same: the death of a member of our community, and thusly a voice that needed to be heard. On January 6, 2012, the Center for Law and Justice convened a press conference. Executive Director, Dr. Alice Green, declared the Center’s objective to grant a voice to Nah-Cream Moore through a full, impartial investigation of his death. She urged the police department to establish and maintain a relationship with the community based on truth and trust through this fragile time and beyond.

The tragic loss of both of these men and the innumerable stories of individual encounters with the criminal justice system from Center clients over the past 27 years have helped to shape the Center’s mission.

MISSION STATEMENT
The Center for Law and Justice envisions a peaceful, just, and compassionate community that provides each resident with equal access to the goods, services, and opportunities of that community. It also seeks the fair and just treatment of all people throughout the civil and criminal justice systems, and works to reduce reliance upon incarceration.

WHY OUR WORK IS IMPORTANT
The Center’s emblem features the words of Frederick Douglas: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” It is these words that our organization seeks to emulate in the work we do. Historically, the poor and racial and ethnic minority groups have been harmed by discriminatory treatment and a structural system that denies them equal access to resources. The Center for Law and Justice demands systematic change through education, advocacy, and legislation. We seek to ensure that every community receives equal goods and services regardless of minority status.
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I. CLIENT BASED SERVICES

*Empowerment through Advocacy*

In 2012 the Center received numerous requests for assistance via phone calls, emails, postal mail, and referrals from other agencies. Over 800 individuals visited our office last year. Out of those clients, 183 had scheduled appointments with a staff legal advisor; while the remaining 625 clients were walk-ins.

During 2012 our staff legal advisors included Annie Rody-Wright and Jessica Gorman. Combined they met with 194 clients last year. Clients received legal rights information, legal guidance, and referral. Program Director, Darryl Johnson, responded to most assistance requests. He provided clients with information, guidance, and referral assistance.

The most common areas of client complaints included: policing (including racial profiling), police officer misconduct and brutality; criminal prosecution (including public defense), bail and attorney referrals; attorney misconduct and inadequate representation. The Center also assisted individual inquires related to family law, civil law, housing issues, employment discrimination, and social services.

**INMATE MAIL CORRESPONDENCE**

Although our prisoner mail program was terminated in 2010 because of funding cuts, the Center still receives an influx of mail weekly. In 2012 we received over seven hundred and fifty letters from inmates incarcerated in local and statewide jails and prisons, as well as a few pieces from counties beyond New York State. Most written requests fall into two categories: Reentry and Legal inquires.

Reentry related inquiries include: advice for cleaning up a rap sheet, tips on obtaining a job with a criminal record, and materials on education.

Besides questions based on the individual’s case, the most common legal inquiries the Center received from inmates involved complaints of abuse sustained while incarcerated and inadequate medical care.

Close to half of the letters we received were requests for our publication “On Your Own.”
ON YOUR OWN

Our resource guide, “On Your Own” functions as an extension of our referral services. It provides information and resources for persons formerly incarcerated, the convicted, and their families in the Capital District. Last year, we updated and expanded “On Your Own” and began distributing the tenth edition of this publication.

The first section of this guide defines the legal rights for persons with a criminal conviction and the first steps an individual will need to take when reentering their community. Topics include: obtaining government documents such as birth certificates and social security cards, finding a job, and obtaining housing. The second section is a directory of contact addresses for local agencies that offer assistance through the transition process. All services listed are offered free of charge or at a modest cost.

Although primarily designed for individuals returning to our community following incarceration, our resource guide has proven useful to the families of incarcerated persons and other organizations. In 2012 we received over three hundred inmate requests for “On Your Own,” just under two-hundred requests from correctional facility transition counselors, and more than fifty requests from other organizations.

An electronic copy of “On Your Own” is available on our website: http://www.cflj.org/resources-and-publications/. This has granted greater access to those individuals who live beyond the Capital Region. Our settings allow for this publication to be downloaded and printed, which has proven to be a cost-effective way for allied organizations to access the information we have collected and distribute it to their clients and constituents.
II. COMMUNITY OUTREACH

*Empowerment through education*

REPORTS

The Center for Law and Justice produced a series of three reports in 2012. The entire report series is available on our website: [http://www.cflj.org/reports/](http://www.cflj.org/reports/)

*The Disproportionate Impact of the Criminal Justice System on People of Color in the Capital District*

The first report of the series was released in February. The report is divided into six sections. The first section analyzes data on minority representation in prison sentences, convictions, county arrests, and city arrests. The second section provides statistical data to demonstrate the disproportionate representation of minorities among arrests, convictions, and sentences to state prison in Albany, Rensselaer, and Schenectady counties. The third section introduces the ramifications of the politically driven “War on Drugs” and defines the “collateral consequences” of a criminal conviction. The fourth section examines the relationships between the police department and the community in the cities of Albany, Troy, and Schenectady. The fifth section considers the report’s findings in the context of “The New Jim Crow” movement. The final section provides recommendations for changes.

The release of the first report was followed by three community meetings, one in each of the counties that the report focuses on: Albany, Troy, and Schenectady. The three events were co-sponsored by the Center for Law and Justice, AVillage, Inc., and Urban Arts Experience. Each event contained a keynote speech from Dr. Alice Green of the Center for Law and Justice, Inc., a community-based discussion, and a special theatrical performance by the Urban Arts Experience.
The first event was held on Tuesday, March 20, 2012 at the First Universalist Society of Albany (Emerson Community Hall, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206). Respondents at this event included Chief Steven Krokoff, City of Albany Police Department and DA David Soares, Albany County District Attorney. Willie White of AVillage, Inc. moderated the discussion. One hundred and thirty-eight people attended this event.

The second event was held on Tuesday, April 10, 2012 at Oakwood Community Center (313 Tenth Street Troy, NY 12180). Invited respondents included police chief John Tedesco, Rensselaer County Police Department; DA Richard J. McNally Jr., Rensselaer County District Attorney; and Sheriff Jack Marhar, Rensselaer County Jail. Willie White of AVillage, Inc. moderated the discussion. Fifty-eight people attended this event.

The final event was held on Wednesday, April 25, 2013 at Schenectady County Community College. The Schenectady Police Department rejected our invitation to participate in this event. The Schenectady County Human Rights Commission moderated the discussion. Fifty-one people attended this event.

Disproportionate Impact of the Juvenile Justice System on Children of Color in the Capital Region

The second report was released in July and examined “Disproportionate Minority Contact” within the Capital Region. The first section of the report describes the juvenile justice system in New York. The second section explains key terms. The third section presents quantitative data indicating the disproportionate representation of minorities compared to their representation in the general population. Section four describes the consequences of involvement with the juvenile justice system. The final section provides specific recommendations for improvement.
SUMMER LEGAL RIGHTS WORKSHOP
Shortly following the release of this report, the Summer Youth and Theatrical Workshop commenced on July 10, 2012. This program educated youth participants on their legal rights and responsibilities while on the streets, particularly when interacting with law enforcement. Our program consisted of five events located in various Albany neighborhoods. Each event began with multiple skits performed by the Urban Stage Street Team followed by a legal rights seminar featuring staff from the Center for Law and Justice and the Albany Police Department. The final session of this program was held on August 9, 2012. Over 100 Albany youth participated in these workshops.

What Have We Done? Mass Incarceration and the Targeting of Albany’s Black Males by Federal, State, and Local Authorities

The final Report in the series was released in October and documents the arrest sweeps that have resulted in racially disparate sentencing for drug related offenses. The first section of this report provides statistical evidence of disproportionate of minorities among arrests, convictions, and sentences to prison in Albany County. The second section documents how young African American men from Albany are now being subjected to additional years in prison, in some cases for committing no new crimes. The third section situates mass incarceration within a wider historical context to identify mass incarceration as a form of structural racism. The fourth section describes the community consequences of mass incarceration and the final section provides suggestions to address these effects.

A community forum was held at the First Universalist Society of Albany on October 25, to mark the release of this report. The Center for Law and Justice allied with Defense of the Bill of Rights Committee to present this event. Co-sponsors included: New York Civil Liberties Union of the Capital Region, Project SALAM, AVillage, and Urban Arts Experience.
THE NEW JIM CROW
The book *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander was published in 2010 and became a crucial resource for the Center for Law and Justice, Inc. during the past year. In this book, Alexander describes how mass incarceration today serves the same purpose as segregation laws did in the Jim Crow era South. Today, there are more African Americans under the Criminal Justice System – in prison or jails, on parole or probation than were enslaved in 1850. Discrimination in housing, education, employment, and voting rights are now legitimized and enforced against ex-offenders. Alexander’s book has sparked a movement. The New Jim Crow movement seeks to end the structural racism that has provoked as well as resulted from the mass incarceration of African Americans.

The Center for Law and Justice created a local chapter of this movement. The Albany-based New Jim Crow study group formed and developed through 2012. The study group formed to encourage community discussion based around the topics presented in Michelle Alexander’s book. The group meets the second Monday of each month. A total of 76 people participated in the New Jim Crow study group last year with a core membership of nine individuals. Besides creating a space in which community dialogue was possible, the New Jim Crow study group has been active with other groups around New York State in order to draw public attention to the issue of “mass incarceration in a colorblind society” as voiced by Alexander and rally for change.
COMMUNITY EVENTS

Transitional: On Your Own and Understanding Your Own Rights
A workshop on reentry and transitioning was held on Thursday, March 8, 2012 at the Capital District Center for Independence. This event featured a presentation by Darryl Johnson, program director of the Center for Law and Justice.

Screening of Into the Abyss
A special screening of the film “Into the Abyss” was shown on Friday, March 16, 2013 at Spectrum 8 Theatre. The film was followed by a panel discussion moderated by the executive director for the Center for Law and Justice, Dr. Alice Green.

Community Dialogue
Following the release of the Grand Jury report on the police shooting death of Nah-Cream Moore, a community dialogue was held on Thursday, March 29, 2012 at Albany Housing Authority. Representatives from the Center for Law and Justice attended this event.

Screening of Music from the Big House
The Center for Law and Justice co-sponsored a special screening of the documentary film, “Music from the Big House.” This event was held on Monday, June 4, 2012 at the Spectrum 8 Theatre.

Screening of Ballin’ at the Graveyard
The Center for Law and Justice co-sponsored a showing of the film “Balling at the Graveyard.” The film screening was held on July 19, 2012 at the Spectrum 8 Theater. A percentage of the proceeds from the showing were donated to the African American Cultural Center.
CENTER IN THE MEDIA


Let’s Discuss Disproportionate Number of Minorities in Prison, *The Daily Gazette*, Dr. Alice Green, April 22, 2012.


PROJECTIONS FOR 2013

- In December we began a petition to Governor Cuomo to appoint a Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation commission. The petition addresses the aftermath of the harsh policies established under New York State’s Rockefeller Drug Laws. Through the upcoming year, we anticipate to have collected 10,000 signatures to present to the Governor’s office.
- We end the year organizing for a film and discussion series celebrating African American History and Culture. The series is projected to span from February to April.
- The Center is beginning research for a report on community policing to be released next year.