From the Director – 2021 Annual Report

In 2021, the Center found itself deeply embedded in responding to a myriad of health, housing, economic and public safety problems unveiled and sparked, in part, by the continuing COVID epidemic and the reluctance of many in the community to get vaccinated. We kept pace with the growing demands for human services without closing our operations. Our incredible staff found ways to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in our community while keeping themselves safe. A major source of support came from Kathlene Thiel who committed to a 5-year grant to fund a part-time case manager position at the Center. This additional staff has helped tremendously during the first year of funding. Many other groups and organizations came together to provide needed support and assistance.

Center staff found new ways to effectively serve the public through changes in our telephone system, office procedures, website, and other forms of digital technology. There was a host of additional demands requiring our attention on key policy issues such as proposed restrictions on bail reform, transformative change in policing to increase police accountability and reduce structural racism; the introduction of a new public safety approach decoupling law enforcement and public safety, challenging qualitative immunity, and reducing the level of secure detention of youth. To address these policy issues, the Center increased its staff involvement in Law Enforcement Assistant Diversion (LEAD) work; published a series of editorials, position papers and reports that included continued work on developing a roadmap to address the over-reliance on secure facilities for troubled youth in Albany County, and making several appearances before the Albany Common Council to provide comment and testimony on several proposed pieces of legislation on police accountability and public safety.

To encourage a series of community discussions around these and other issues related to the Center’s advocacy mission and to raise additional funds to support its work, I wrote and published a book titled, “We Who Believe in Freedom – Activism and the Struggle for Social Justice.” In launching the book, we invited a number of community groups and organizations to join with us in presenting their planned works to address systemic racism in our community and how we might collaborate for effectiveness.

At the end of the year, our Center staff planned to arrange more community discussion on key policy issues, continue our voter education drive, conclude our report on movement towards zero youth detention; and develop new strategies for dealing with a housing vacuum; and provide the leadership to transform the city’s policing and public safety functions to better serve the needs of the community. After an extremely busy year, we are in a position to strengthen our advocacy and secure needed change.
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.

About the Center

The Center for Law and Justice was founded by Dr. Alice Green in 1985, and marked its 36th anniversary in 2021. During its existence, the Center has been serving low-income and disadvantaged communities in the Capital Region through services, education and advocacy. Before founding the Center, Dr. Green was a social worker and a teacher, and earned a doctorate degree in criminal justice and three master’s degrees — education, social work, and criminology. The common thread in the Center’s work has been finding freedom, not just for individuals, but by working to change structural racism.

One of the primary components of the Center for Law and Justice is facilitating the successful transition of formerly incarcerated individuals into their community. The Center strives to educate the community to embrace the entire spectrum of issues encompassed in re-entry, including transition services, The Center also plays a major role in identifying and alleviating individual, social, and institutional barriers to re-entry.

The Center for Law and Justice employs four major strategies to accomplish its objectives: prevention and empowerment, community education and outreach, advocacy, and community organizing.

Prevention and Empowerment

Client Intake and Referral Services

The Center responds to calls Monday through Friday from community members seeking help with issues such as criminal justice, legal rights, civil justice, housing, discrimination, 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 including legal information and health system navigation.

In 2021 the Center directly helped 552 clients through its intake and referral services. The top three intake categories in 2021 were:

- Legal rights issues (80)
  - Workplace discrimination
  - Landlord/tenant disputes
- Civil rights violations by police
- Housing issues (62)
  - Included help with evictions, especially for public housing tenants
  - A Center staff member served on the Affordable Housing Task Force of the South End Community Collaborative
- Incarceration complaints (42)
  - Inhumane treatment
  - Unjust disciplinary hearings

**Client Intake and Referral Issues in 2021**

The Center also provides a limited number of grocery gift cards to those in urgent need of food, funded by Albany Medical College. Heating assistance is provided to needy households during the winter, including help applying for the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP).

**Legal Information**

Legal information and advice are provided by an attorney who volunteers his time for the Center, and includes, but is not limited to, the following areas:
- Criminal
- Immigration
- Divorce
- Custody
- Discrimination
- Trusts and estates
Legal Aid Society Partnership

Legal information and representation for civil cases is provided to CFLJ clients free of charge by attorneys who volunteer their time and expertise at the Center. In addition to the pro bono counseling provided by the Center’s volunteer staff attorney, the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York (LASNNY) provides services for the Center through a grant-funded partnership. A designated LASNNY attorney helps CFLJ clients with legal issues such as public benefits, housing, re-entry from incarceration, housing, work force issues, and unemployment.

This partnership gives CFLJ clients access to a full range of advocacy and legal services in addition to representation in court or at hearings. For example, LASNNY has helped clients assert their rights to accommodations during the DSS application process, obtain free fingerprinting needed to access their RAP sheets and seal past criminal convictions, apply for certificates of relief or good conduct, and remove errors of past criminal convictions.

Legal services include help with family court issues, discrimination cases, student’s rights in schools, and probate information. Other legal issues are addressed on a case-by-case basis – either by the designated attorney or utilizing the streamlined referral process to other LASNNY attorneys and programs or externally to other organizations as appropriate.

During 2021 the Center referred 109 cases to LASNNY which included the following:

- Housing
- Public benefits
- Social Security Income and Disability Income
- Unemployment
- Re-entry from incarceration
- Child protective services
- Family court

This unique partnership represents a substantial benefit to the community, as it allows LASNNY to expand its client base to those who would otherwise not be eligible due to LASNNY’s standard client limitations that take income and other resources into account.

Albany Medical College Partnership

“Health Equity Project” services are provided to clients of the Center through a partnership with Albany Medical College. The HEP is part of the service-learning curriculum at Albany Medical College and participating medical students learn about public health, health policy, and the social determinants of health through their relationships with community members.
It is widely recognized that the social determinants of health, including navigating the healthcare system and accessing care, have a significant impact on the health of individuals and communities. Since 2016, the Albany Medical College Division of Community Outreach and Medical Education has worked with clients of the Center for Law & Justice to address issues related to healthcare and the social determinants of health through the Health Equity Project. Students from Albany Medical College and the University at Albany School of Public Health work under supervision from Albany Medical College staff to help CFLJ clients with these issues.

In 2021 the Health Equity Project held 207 meetings and phone calls with Center clients on health and related matters. Services included help with:

- Finding a health care provider and making appointments
- Providing social support to clients
- Insurance enrollment and help with issues
- Transportation to doctors and pharmacies
- Housing, food, case management
- Patient empowerment
- Other miscellaneous services

Supplementing these major activities, the Health Equity Project developed COVID-19 fact sheets, vaccine and booster fact sheets, and compiled locations for vaccinations and testing. Participating students also assisted with multi-service center research and planning, and the HEP compiled lists of buprenorphine providers and accessible mental health care providers.

**Capital Region Connections**

The Center produces, updates and distributes this free guide for residents of the Capital District and people currently or formerly detained in jail or prison. An electronic version can also be found on the Center’s website. **Connections** 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. It provides information on the topics listed below. Funds for printing were provided by the Albany County Legislature.
Community Education, Outreach, Organizing and Advocacy

The Time for Reckoning
The Time for Reckoning was initiated in 2020 by the Center for Law and Justice, NY Writers Institute, All of Us, WMHT and Justice Center of Rensselaer County as a vocal response to the tragic acts of police violence against people of color. The project addresses systemic racism in the Capital Region’s justice system and throughout the country. Its overarching goal is to imagine a just society free of systemic racism, where Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) truly have no reason to fear that they or a loved one will lose their lives at the hands of police. “The Time for Reckoning” achieves this by providing a multi-media, interactive and collaborative forum for the voices of local leaders and impacted community members, local elected officials, and nationally known experts.

The campaign continued to grow in 2021 to develop (1) a record of community discussions about transforming policing from across the Capital Region, (2) a trove of educational resources placing a local focus on systemic racism and (3) a microgrant program that has supported the work of over a dozen diverse community organizations.

Through generous donations from the Steve McKee Foundation and Price Chopper, Time for Reckoning was able to establish a microgrant program to support innovative community projects that are working to eradicate systemic racism in the Capital Region and New York State. Project areas included Social Justice, History, Arts, Health Equity, and Journalism. Time for Reckoning partners then shared the chosen projects with the community on their respective networks to further amplify and encourage societal change.

Black History Month Film Series
Each February the Center sponsors a film series celebrating Black History Month. Films are free to the public and include a discussion after the film. In 2021 the featured film was the documentary True Justice: Bryan Stevenson’s Fight for Equality, about his struggle to create greater fairness in the criminal justice system. It follows his 30 years of work on behalf of the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned; the struggle that is required when the poor and people of color are wrongfully condemned or unfairly sentenced, and the personal toll it takes.

The discussion after the film was led by guest speakers Lavell Jones and Jasper Mills. Mr. Jones was convicted of a 1997 Albany homicide he did not commit based solely on his coerced false confession, which he later recanted. Mr. Mills is the former chief counsel for the Albany County Sheriff’s Department and the founding partner/owner of The Mills Law Group.

City of Albany Policing Reform and Reinvention Collaborative
Early in the year, a final report on the work on this collaborative was submitted by the mayor’s office to the Albany Common Council. Dr. Green provided written public comment to the Albany Common Council Public Safety Committee, in which she expressed her deep
appreciation for the work of all the volunteers on the Collaborative who contributed to making Albany a safer place to live for all our residents.

She also, however, expressed concern that the city had not completed its responsibility to transform the recommendations of the Collaborative into a Plan that reinvents policing in Albany. What has been submitted thus far is a set of recommendations, with no indication regarding which of those recommendations the city is committed to fulfilling. A Plan requires goals, objectives, implementation strategies, projected target dates, required resources, and a proposed budget. The Public Safety Committee should direct the city to submit a Plan to reinvent Albany policing, for the Common Council's consideration.

**Albany Police Department Use of Tear Gas**
The Albany Common Council met in May to consider a proposed ban on the use of tear gas by the Albany Police Department. The Center submitted written comments in support of a ban, for the following reasons:

1. There is no morality in the police using weapons of war against its own citizens.
2. The Common Council has a responsibility to remove weapons of war from the discretion of people under stress.
3. There is an urgency to ban tear gas to motivate the police department to adopt humane de-escalation tools.
4. The people of Albany are in solidarity over this ban.
5. The Common Council, elected by the members of their own neighborhoods, must not surrender their authority to the mayor.

**Albany Police Department Response to South Station Protest**
Following a peaceful protest at South Station about a police shooting in another state, protesters were pepper-sprayed and one was injured by a police officer. This led to the protesters calling for the firing of specific officers and setting up an encampment outside the South Station, vowing to stay till their demands were met. Neither the Police Chief nor the recognized the protestors’ requests for a meeting as an opportunity to de-escalate the situation.

After assuring the protestors, through a liaison, that they would not be forcefully removed, the police gave the protestors fifteen minutes to pack up their tents and move on April 22, 2021. After fifteen minutes dozens of police officers appeared, carrying batons, riot shields, and zip ties. Many officers covered their badges with black tape to conceal their identities. Lined up shoulder to shoulder, officers marched forward in unison ten feet at a time. Several social media videos showed officers destroying tents and personal belongings at each ten-foot juncture, and pushing protestors down with riot shields and hitting them with batons. Eight protestors were arrested. One was hospitalized.
Dr. Alice Green and the Center for Law and Justice joined many community members in condemning the Albany Police Department’s militaristic acts against the protestors. They agreed with Chief City Auditor Dr. Dorsey Applyrs, Common Council President Corey Ellis, and eleven Common Council Members that the tactics used by the APD to remove the protestors outside South Station were not acceptable. Dr. Green held a press conference that was attended by several leaders in the area, including former Albany Common Council member Barbara Smith, Albany NAACP President Debora Brown-Johnson, Community Police Review Board Chair Nairobi Vives and other area activists. Their position is that the forcible removal of non-violent protestors serves only to fuel tension and further damage the relationship between the police department and segments of the Albany community.

‘Vote Yes on Prop 7’ Campaign

Proposition 7 (Prop 7) is an important public safety law that increases the independence of the Albany Community Police Review Board in better holding the city’s police accountable. It was approved overwhelmingly by voters following a voter education campaign led by the Center for Law and Justice. The campaign brought vital public safety policy knowledge to communities most impacted by police: Arbor Hill, West Hill, and the South End.

The Voter Education Campaign Strategy included:
- Coordinating with other local organizations to focus the strategy
- Directing the citywide Prop 7 campaign resources to areas of the city facing most police interaction
  - Canvassing and volunteer outreach activities started conversations with residents and let them know about the important proposition and how it would impact their lives
  - Canvassing in areas that had recently seen shootings and are designated by mainstream media as ‘dangerous’
  - Conducting outreach targeting residents with strong voter turnout history, and outreach to neighbors in target communities
The Prop 7 campaign established and strengthened ties to local progressive organizations to join forces to promote crucial public safety policy in the city of Albany.

- The Center is working with progressive city and county council members, Citizen Action, Community Leadership Team of LEAD, and AVillage.
- Working with partners enabled a sharing of strategic and material resources that the Center was able to contribute to and use.

The close relationship to the library branches gave the Center an opportunity to share Prop 7 information with library guests, and the libraries were a resource hub that staff could depend on when doing outreach away from the office.

**Dr. Alice Green and the Media**
The Center’s Executive Director, Dr. Alice Green, is often the “go to person” for the local media on issues pertaining to criminal justice and racism. As a result, she helps to educate the community on important issues and has written and spoken on topics during 2021 that included the following:

- Actions by the Albany Police Department toward protesters at the South Station, as described above
- Time for Reckoning community engagement
- Times Union “Community Voices” panel
- Interviews by WAMC on criminal justice issues
- Siena College presentation on mass incarceration
- Narration of “Searching for Timbuctoo” documentary
- Times Union article on “Stop and Frisk”
- Gun violence forum panel sponsored by the League of Women Voters
- The release of Dr. Green’s book, *We Who Believe in Freedom*

**Supporting the City and County of Albany**

**LEAD – Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion**
LEAD is a nationwide program that was first implemented in Seattle in 2011. The city of Albany was an early adopter in 2016, with the support of Dr. Green and in partnership with Albany City and County.

The Center’s Executive Director, Dr. Alice Green, is a member of the LEAD Policy Coordinating Group for the City of Albany. The Center also supports the Operations Working Group and the Community Leadership Team. The LEAD program 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 often 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.

Key LEAD activities in 2021 included:

- Search for and hiring of new Project Managers
- Participation in the Operations Group and the Data Committee
- Community Leadership Team expansion
- Regular meetings of LEAD partners
- A community survey of Albany residents to determine understanding of the
  program and opinions on it, led by Siena College

Albany County Zero Youth Detention Task Force

In 2019, Albany County Executive Dan McCoy asked Dr. Green to chair the county’s Zero
Youth Detention Task Force. The task force consists of county and community leaders,
exerts and advocates involved with youth justice to explore best practices in order to help
shape collective efforts to reduce youth detention in Albany County. The County Executive
and Dr. Green recognize that youth detention is a public health, behavioral health and legal
concern that touches lives across a diverse spectrum of our community.

As Task Force Chair, Dr. Green formed four working groups to provide subject matter
expertise and analysis for different elements and areas of the juvenile legal system. The
working groups were categorized as follows: the Public Health Concerns for Youth and
Families Working Group; the Community Service and Education Working Group; the
Current State of Juvenile Detention System Working Group; and the Racial and Ethnic
Disparities Working Group.

Meetings and progress were delayed in 2020 as well as 2021 due to the impact of COVID-
19 and staffing changes at Albany County. Task force working groups did, however, meet a
number of times in 2021; meetings included presentations by key stakeholders involved in
the juvenile legal system and a review of existing programs and interventions.

Throughout 2021, working groups brainstormed recommendations for change according
to the five main objectives for achieving Zero Youth Detention:

1. Lead with racial equity
2. Prevent youth from entering the juvenile legal system by focusing upstream and
   on systems to have the greatest impact
3. Divert youth from further law enforcement, formal legal processes, and secure
detention, and into community-based options
4. Support youth and families to reduce recurrence of legal system involvement
   and increase healthy outcomes
5. Align and optimize connections between systems to increase effectiveness
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. Volunteer assistance is provided by private citizens, local attorneys, and a diverse group of student interns from colleges and universities. Many of the Center’s student interns come from Albany Medical College and the University at Albany School of Public Health. During 2021, financial donations to the Center came from individuals, foundations, and companies including:

- Capital District Physicians Health Plan
- Steve McKee Foundation
- Carl Touhey Foundation
- Tides Foundation
- Kathlene Thiel
- LEAD Grant
- Delmar Presbyterian Church
- PB&J Foundation
- Albany Medical College
- Lillian Tillman-DeWitt
- Anonymous

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