

“Silence in the face of racism is collusion with racism...”

Excerpt, SMRLS Racial Justice Policy



Frogtown

In the last year, **SMRLS helped 140 households** in the Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul.

Among other outcomes, the project helped clients:

- Avoid foreclosure or other loss of their homes;
- Overcome the denial of their rights under the lease;
- Enforce their right to decent, habitable housing;
- Obtain repairs to their dwelling;
- Overcome the denial of their rights in subsidized housing; and,
- Avoid the loss of housing due to lack of income.

The project preserved 65 units of affordable housing by enforcing tenants’ rights in a tenant remedies action, rent escrow action, negotiations with landlords, and negotiations with the City of Saint Paul.

Over the past year **attorneys established an ongoing eviction expungement clinic** at the Rondo Community Outreach Library, and conducted a presentation to the Frogtown/Rondo Home Fund.

SMRLS is part of bi-monthly meetings with 33 community partners at the Rondo Library.



Karen Community

SMRLS, in collaboration with the Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM) and other groups, worked with a large group of Karen-speaking tenants who immigrated to the United States from Burma and Thailand.

SMRLS provided education to Karen-speaking tenants about their right to have apartments kept in reasonable repair. Under state law, if a problem arises - like a furnace goes out or a leaky sink - tenants may take steps to enforce their rights to habitable housing.

Tenants told SMRLS staff about serious repair issues such as roaches, bed bugs and mice.

Al Harris, SMRLS paralegal, visited apartments with a staff member of KOM and documented the need for repair.

SMRLS sent a letter to the landlords requesting that the problems be addressed, therefore helping the tenants enforce their rights to habitable housing.

SMRLS helped 35 families assert their right to habitable housing, representing 177 individuals in this effort. Additionally, SMRLS recently obtained a favorable money judgment for one client who asserted that she should receive rent money back and be reimbursed for unfair fees and charges.



Mankato

SMRLS worked with Somali families in Mankato to help open communication between Somali families and the Mankato School District. This fostered increased Somali participation in advisory roles.

Through SMRLS involvement the Mankato School District has made many positive changes in its operations to better serve its Somali population.

In the past 12 months, the Mankato School District has:

- Issued written notices in Somali informing parents and their children of their right to refuse English Learner (“EL”) services.
- Provided several online documents (with a link to translations in Somali) that explain all aspects of EL programming.
- Agreed to add the mother of a SMRLS client to the District Advisory Committee, which makes her the first Somali member on the Committee.
- Hired a Somali paraprofessional to the school staff (Edina has 10 Somali paraprofessionals. Mankato had none.)

Somali leaders reported that there has been a significant improvement during the past year in open and respectful communication between District staff and the Somali community.

SMRLS' Racial Justice Committee Presents:

2015 Report to the Community

The Racial Justice Committee is a part of Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services ("SMRLS") and serves to welcome all clients, encourages and supports a diverse staff, and advocates effectively to eliminate barriers for persons of color and to ensure their equal access to and fair treatment by SMRLS and the legal system.



Success by the Numbers

11 languages spoken by SMRLS staff: Arabic, ASL, French, Hmong, Igbo, Khmer, Lao, Somali, Spanish, Russian and Thai.

8,859 cases closed in 2015.

65 affordable housing units preserved in Frogtown with the assistance of SMRLS staff in enforcing tenants' rights.

At SMRLS...

22.6% of attorney professionals are of minority decent, compared to 2015 census data showing that 7.29% of minorities in Minnesota were available for a similar position.

50% of office or clerical workers are of minority decent, compared to 2015 census data showing that 11.5% of minorities in Minnesota were available for a similar position.

52.6% of paralegals or technicians are of minority decent, compared to 2015 census data showing that 8.99% of minorities in Minnesota were available for such a position.

Here is a snapshot of three projects that took place in 2015:

Frogtown

Community partners worked with SMRLS to develop a project utilizing litigation and other legal tools to help the community maintain affordable housing. SMRLS is a part of this effort to ensure the neighborhood's growth is equitable for all residents.

Karen Community

SMRLS worked in collaboration with the Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM) and other groups to provide representation to tenants on their rights as they relate to reasonable repair.

Mankato

With the help of SMRLS, one Somali mother was able to exercise her right to refuse English Learning ("EL") services on behalf of her child in order to work towards a more balanced school program. SMRLS involvement in this matter not only helped energize the previously demoralized child, but has also helped establish more open communication with the School District therefore bringing about a number of positive changes in the last 12 months.

Additional information may be found on the next page.

Did You Know?

SMRLS' litigation efforts in **Garcia v Independent School District #625** led to the adoption of the District's first comprehensive programs to assure equal educational opportunity and to overcome the achievement gap through bilingual and bicultural education, assessments, supports, parent involvement and school placement.

The Ramsey County Bar Association recognized SMRLS for its commitment to diversity in 2009 for the leadership, organizational vision and special projects aimed at meeting the needs of racial and cultural minorities such as HELP, ELAP and RIMS.