

# SMRLS' Racial Justice Committee Presents: 2017 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.

## 2017 In Review

Since 2015, SMRLS' Racial Justice Committee (RJC) has produced an annual Report to the Community. The Annual Report serves three primary purposes: Create awareness of how SMRLS is involved within the community; Create awareness of the programs that SMRLS offers; and Create awareness of the services that are available within the community.

For 2017, the RJC has chosen to highlight our ongoing work with several Healthcare Legal Partnerships, our work in St. Paul with Expungement clinics, and our “Know Your Rights” anti-offensive speech outreach events. All of these programs impact our clients and our communities and serve to further our Racial Justice Policy of working to eliminate barriers for persons of color and to ensure equal access and fair treatment by SMRLS and the legal system.



## Eviction Expungement Clinics

Eviction records are a significant barrier to obtaining stable housing. Landlords often refuse to accept applications for rental housing due to past evictions, even if the balance was paid off or the case involved a fair housing issue such as domestic violence or disability. **According to the Minneapolis Innovation Team, nearly half of renter households in North Minneapolis experienced an eviction filing in the past 3 years.** This finding is consistent with SMRLS' contention that eviction records disproportionately impact low-income and minority families, and foster resegregation in our communities.

To address this problem, beginning in June of 2015 a SMRLS attorney began convening a monthly eviction expungement clinic at the **Rondo Outreach Library**. The clinic assists low-income clients in petitioning to the court to expunge eviction records. With a vacancy rate hovering around 3% in Saint Paul, expunging eviction records is vital for equitable access to safe, affordable housing. In 2017, SMRLS provided detailed, individualized advice to 32 clinic attendees.

After several months of expungement clinics, SMRLS determined many clients need more than advice in order to obtain expungement. When a clinic attendee needs assistance drafting and filing the expungement petition, SMRLS now refers cases to its own **Volunteer Attorney Program (VAP)**. In 2017, 5 volunteer attorneys (VAs) did eviction expungement cases. Overall, VAP served 10 clients with a total of 12 expungements. This included cases placed directly with VAs and cases through our Eviction Expungement Clinic.

SMRLS continues to explore new strategies to stem the tide of the eviction epidemic. The housing unit recently applied for a grant to research the impact of evictions and propose a solution to the problem. Under a new grant funded by the **McKnight Foundation**, a SMRLS attorney will conduct research to determine how eviction records affect different populations in the community. The housing unit hopes that after conducting research, the attorney will work with the Ramsey County Court to implement a pilot project where eviction records are “sealed” upon filing. By ensuring these records are not viewable to the public, tenants with less-than-perfect rental histories will have an improved chance of finding stable housing.



**4,373**  
cases closed in 2017 for people of color

**\$3,748,142.41**  
money and benefits protected or recovered by legal services for clients

**42%**  
of SMRLS non-attorneys who are people of color.

**17%**  
of SMRLS attorneys who are people of color.

**11 languages**  
spoken by SMRLS staff.

**24**  
Bilingual SMRLS staff

## Know Your Rights – Responding to Offensive Speech and Behavior

**Community members in the SMRLS service area are becoming increasingly targeted by racist and offensive speech, threats, and physical violence due to their race, ethnicity, or immigration status.**

SMRLS recognizes that silence in the face of racism is collusion with racism. These issues also impact individual and community health. Educating communities with this information can have a positive impact on health because knowing how to respond to offensive speech and behavior can help people stay safe and reduce a person's anxiety and stress.



Through a grant from the **Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation**, SMRLS staff are educating rural communities in Southern Minnesota by providing information on their legal rights and highlighting available resources for people when confronted with offensive speech and behavior at home, work, out in public or at school. The events allow participants to ask questions and share personal experiences of the effect offensive speech and behavior has had on them or their families.

SMRLS' goal is to educate people at 20 community legal education events throughout Southern Minnesota. SMRLS has already held events in Mankato and Rochester, with additional events planned in St. Peter, Sleepy Eye, Worthington, Winona, and more.

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## Healthcare Legal Partnerships

**The mission of the SMRLS Healthcare Legal Partnerships is to address the health-harming legal needs of low-income patients.** Currently, SMRLS has Healthcare Legal Partnerships at **Open Door Health Center** in Mankato, **Bethesda Family Medicine Clinic** in St. Paul and **Children's Hospital** in St. Paul. All three partnerships have full time staff attorneys working with clients to resolve a variety of different legal issues that are affecting the health of patients. Many of the clients served through these partnerships are people of color and non-English speaking. Many of the clients serviced have never received prior direct service through SMRLS, meaning we are reaching clients we have been unable to reach in the past. All three Healthcare Legal Partnerships have an education component which allows the SMRLS Staff Attorney to educate medical providers, staff, and the community about common legal issues.



In one case, a patient was referred to the Healthcare Legal Partnership because their landlord refused to replace a smelly, moldy dishwasher which was potentially causing health issues for a child in the patient's family. After the SMRLS attorney got involved, the landlord agreed to make the necessary repair with no cost to the client. In another case, a patient was referred to the Healthcare Legal Partnership because her former partner stole a copy of her apartment key and the landlord refused to change the locks. The Healthcare Legal Partnership Staff Attorney helped the client show her landlord she was a survivor of domestic violence and was in danger unless he changed her locks and repaired her deadbolt. These examples show that access to an attorney and free legal advice can have broader implications to individual, family and broader community health and well-being, especially for individuals who face barriers based upon race, ethnicity or language abilities.

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## Additional Resources

Get help by visiting [www.smrls.org](http://www.smrls.org) or by calling 1-888-575-2954 to determine if you are eligible for services. More information about the RJC can be found at [www.smrls.org/about-us/smrls-racial-justice-committee](http://www.smrls.org/about-us/smrls-racial-justice-committee). Follow @smrlsmn on Facebook and Twitter for the latest SMRLS news, alerts about RJC events, and stories.