

# SMRLS' Racial Justice Committee Presents: 2016 Report to the Community



## 2016 in Review:

There are three primary purposes for the RJC's report to the community:

- 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.

Over the past year, the RJC has seen SMRLS' deep involvement with our 33-county service area through the ongoing Education Law Advocacy Project in St. Paul. In 2016, most ELAP clients have seen their education performance improve. Secondly, ELAP partnered with and received a grant from Minnesota Organization for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome ("MOFAS") which partially helps to fund the Project.

The RJC also acknowledges the new SMRLS partnership with Somali Community Resettlement Services, Inc. in Faribault, where we now offer office hours every other week to the new and growing Somali population. Additionally, a SMRLS attorney successfully represented a Somali client (found through this partnership) in maintaining his SSI disability benefits.

The RJC also wishes to create awareness of the resources and services available at John A. Johnson Elementary and, specifically, at the East Side Learning Center.



## Demographics by the Numbers

**11** languages  
spoken by SMRLS staff.

**4,955** cases  
closed in 2016 for people of color.

**432,000** people  
in SMRLS' service area who identify as being  
from a racial or ethnic group that is nonwhite.

**28%**  
households that are cost-burdened in  
SMRLS' service area.

**186,000**  
foreign-born individuals who live in  
SMRLS' service area.

**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.

## Education Law Advocacy Project (ELAP)



**ELAP's mission is to help kids stay and succeed in public school, by utilizing the legal framework in a collaborative manner with parents, students, school officials and others who have a role in helping students achieve in school.**

A significant majority of represented students are young people of color. Most student clients have remained in school, and have had their individual educational and related needs addressed in a more effective fashion, as a result of SMRLS' representation.

ELAP also helps repair communication and working relationships between school staff and students and families to help address the educational achievement gap, and provides family and community group education services and partners with non-profits such as the Minnesota Organization for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

**Some of the most significant issues ELAP finds in its current practice are:**

- the impact of childhood trauma on a student's success in school,
- the need to improve ELL services,
- cases involving significant behavioral issues or where children are far behind their peers in reading, and
- the lack of community based mental health and other services to help students.

## Somali Community Resettlement Services

**After conducting focus groups in our region for the SMRLS Needs Assessment, SMRLS found a significant need for outreach in Faribault, MN.** After establishing office hours every other Monday at Somali Community Resettlement Services, Inc. (SCRS) in Faribault in June 2016, SMRLS staff have met with nearly 30 clients with issues that include family law, immigration, Social Security disability, and housing.

Since June 2016, SMRLS has collaborated with SCRS Director Abdullah N. Hared "Sharif" to identify issues affecting clients in the community, met with a Somali psychologist at SCRS who visits and treats patients in the area, and discussed the medical documentation required for Social Security cases that will assist in securing benefits for SMRLS clients.

In one case, SMRLS helped a young Somali man who was stricken with polio as a child and had since been denied Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits twice. The Social Security non-examining doctors had determined that he was not credible. SMRLS represented the client at the hearing and proved that the client qualified for disability due to his polio condition. **The Judge found that SMRLS' client was fully credible, allowing the client to finally begin receiving SSI.**



## Johnson A. Johnson Achievement Plus Program



Several years back, it was learned that some elementary schools in St. Paul had up to 70% turnover, meaning nearly 7 out of 10 kids didn't finish in the same school that they started in. Oftentimes this was caused by financial issues, legal issues and lack of affordable housing many families are not able to stabilize and will move as much as three or four times in one year.

**To address this issue, SMRLS has been actively involved in the John A. Johnson Achievement Plus program, whose goal is to assist families in their own community and to provide a variety of helpful services.**

As part of the Housing Alliance Law Office, SMRLS educates teachers, staff, and administration at John A. Johnson Elementary on what services SMRLS provides and eligibility qualifications. All staff and school personnel know about SMRLS' services and how to access them. Partners also include St. Mary's Clinic, Eastside Family Services, Eastside Learning Center, Children's Dental clinic, East YMCA, and others.

**The Housing Alliance Law Office is open from 9:00am to 4:30pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays.**