



The Racial Justice Committee (RJC) is a part of Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS). It serves to welcome all clients, encourage and support a diverse staff, and advocate effectively to eliminate barriers for people of color, and ensure equal access to and fair treatment by SMRLS and the legal system. We seek to create awareness of SMRLS' involvement in the community and the programs available to eligible clients.

Legal Checkup Clinics

SMRLS trains and supports local volunteer attorneys who staff **Legal Checkup Clinics**. The primary goals are to (1) increase access to SMRLS' services in more remote areas; (2) identify and address problems with on-the-spot advice; and (3) improve health outcomes by addressing safety, habitability, income security, and other issues. Volunteer attorneys use legal checkup forms to identify legal problems concerning housing, utilities, safety, government benefits, debt, expungements, employment, immigration, and health. Often, attorneys identify issues which have not been recognized by clients.

At the first 41 clinics, 110 legal checkups were performed, and they identified 257 distinct legal problems. Participants who needed follow-up advice or full representation were referred back to SMRLS' staff. Recurring clinics are held in the greater Mankato area at the **Open Door Health Center**, **Wellcome Manor Family Services** inpatient addiction treatment center, **Holy Grounds** homeless drop-in center, the **REACH** drop-in center for homeless youth, and **Partners for Affordable Housing**. The **Community Connect** event in St. James incorporated a Legal Checkup Clinic. SMRLS is in the process of expanding to Worthington and other southwest Minnesota locations. The clinics are funded by a grant from the Legal Services Corporation.

Race on the Brain

In February 2018, more than 50 people attended a Continuing Legal Education presentation by **Dr. Jonathan Kahn**, Professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, about his book, "**Race on the Brain: What Implicit Bias Gets Wrong About the Struggle for Racial Justice**." SMRLS' Racial Justice Committee co-sponsored the event, along with **Mitchell Hamline School of Law**, **Legal Services State Support**, and the **Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas**. Dr. Kahn facilitated a discussion regarding the concept of implicit bias.

Demographics

11 languages spoken by SMRLS staff.

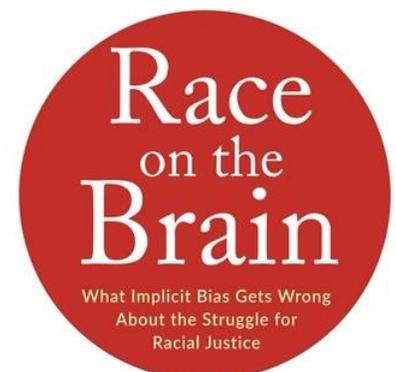
9,051 cases closed in 2018.

27 bilingual SMRLS staff.

14% of SMRLS attorneys are people of color.

28% of SMRLS non-attorneys are people of color.

8.2% of people in SMRLS' service area speak a language other than English at home.



Agricultural Worker Project

In recent years, interest has increased in understanding the food we consume. “Have pesticides been applied to this apple?” “How was this chicken raised?” Unfortunately, one vital question is often overlooked: “How was the farmworker who harvested my food treated?”

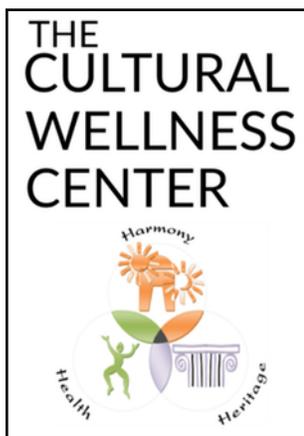
Farmworkers make the U.S. food system possible, yet they are often exploited and underappreciated. Farmworkers have specialized legal needs and significant barriers to justice due to geographical, linguistic, and cultural isolation.



The **Agricultural Worker Project (AWP)** is a specialized unit of SMRLS that provides legal representation, education, and outreach to agricultural workers throughout Minnesota and North Dakota. While agricultural workers in the area are often Spanish speakers who travel from Texas or Mexico to perform seasonal work, a growing number of South Africans and Ukrainians are performing temporary agricultural work under the H-2A visa program. Minnesota is also home to many livestock and poultry workers who live in the state on a year-round basis.

AWP staff travel extensively throughout Minnesota and North Dakota to meet with workers. During the 2018 outreach season, **AWP spoke directly with nearly 1,300 agricultural workers and distributed approximately 4,000 bilingual legal rights calendars.** Outreach and education efforts have proved successful in at least two ways: (1) workers are learning about their rights and resolving work-related legal issues directly with their employers; and (2) workers are seeking AWP’s assistance to recover unpaid wages, combat employment discrimination or retaliation, and improve workplace health and safety conditions.

Community Tenant Training



SMRLS collaborated with the **Cultural Wellness Center of St. Paul (CWC)** to provide tenant training. **SMRLS and CWC developed a two-hour tenant education class that was held every Tuesday night for eight weeks.** SMRLS attorneys taught the class of approximately 15 students about their rights and responsibilities as tenants, how the eviction process works, when criminal and eviction expungement remedies are available, and how to correct credit and tenant screening reports. The collaboration’s goal was to help people understand their rights and obligations as tenants, repair their rental and credit history, and ultimately, market themselves as better tenants and potential homeowners.

CWC focused on empowerment, the cultural consequences of evictions on people of color, and the implications for children who face unstable living environments and displacement. SMRLS’ staff saw significant growth in the students’ understanding of both the legal and practical components presented. This program demonstrates what

SMRLS and other legal service providers already knew: **taking a proactive approach to housing issues prior to the initiation of legal proceedings promotes housing stability and prevents homelessness.** Knowledge is a powerful tool.

Additional Resources

Get help by visiting www.smrls.org or by calling 1-888-575-2954 to determine if you are eligible for services. Follow @smrlsmn on Facebook and Twitter for the latest SMRLS news, alerts about RJC events, and stories.