



SMRLS' RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE PRESENTS

# 2019 Report to the Community

## Who We Are

The Racial Justice Committee (RJC) is a part of Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS) and serves to welcome all clients, encourage and support a diverse staff, and advocate effectively to eliminate barriers for persons of color and to ensure their equal access to and fair treatment by SMRLS and the legal system. The projects highlighted in this report demonstrate how we're making an impact in the lives of our clients and our communities and how they serve to further our Racial Justice Policy. More information about the Racial Justice Committee can be found online at [www.smrls.org/rjc](http://www.smrls.org/rjc).

## SMRLS Works With Local Prosecutors on Criminal Expungements

A criminal conviction can make it hard to get a job, an apartment, student loans, state licenses or adopt a child. The punishment lasts long after a sentence is served.



Left: Ramsey County Attorney John Choi  
(Photo courtesy of Ramsey County)

SMRLS worked with Ramsey and Washington County Attorneys to help people expunge old criminal records. We sent letters to more than 1,700 individuals convicted of fifth-degree drug possession more than 10 years ago. SMRLS offered to vet cases for expungement and draft an agreement with the prosecutor to expunge the record.

The idea is that instead of criminal defendants coming to the court to request an expungement, prosecutors would make an effort to reach out to defendants who had been law abiding since their conviction.

The result of our project is an online tool where people with criminal records in Ramsey or Washington Counties can apply for an expungement. The County Attorney can agree to expunge. If they do, they will file the papers with the court and request the expungement.

The traditional expungement process is difficult and expensive. The project allows people with fewer resources to gain access to expungement. It promotes the values of equity, fairness, and redemption.

To see if you might qualify for a criminal expungement in Ramsey or Washington Counties, go to [www.helpsealmyrecord.org](http://www.helpsealmyrecord.org).

## A Course in Cultural Competency



Athena Hollins is the Diversity and Inclusion Director at the Minnesota State Bar Association

On May 3, 2019, SMRLS staff in offices throughout our service area gathered for Athena Hollins' "Cultural Competency" training presentation. "Cultural competency," according to Ms. Hollins, means "the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures." This deepened understanding is becoming even more important as Minnesota's population continues to change and grow increasingly diverse.

SMRLS is committed to educating staff and legal decision-makers about the different cultures of our clients and to working toward equal justice and equal access to the courts, administrative agencies and forums which constitute our system of justice. We hope to host more educational opportunities for our staff and our communities in 2020 and beyond.

## SMRLS Staff at a Glance

**31%** of SMRLS non-attorneys are people of color

**15%** of SMRLS attorneys are people of color

**27** bilingual SMRLS staff

**11** languages spoken by SMRLS staff

## Olmsted County Eviction Prevention Project

The U.S. Census estimates that 6.5% of the Olmsted County population is black or African American; however, black or African American tenants in Olmsted County are four times more likely to face eviction.

In January 2019, SMRLS, Legal Assistance of Olmsted County and Lutheran Social Services created the Eviction Prevention Project (EPP). At the EPP, tenants are provided legal representation during the eviction process. Tenants also access a streamlined process for finding government and community agency eviction prevention funds.



Olmsted County Court House

The EPP holds clinics on Mondays and Thursdays at the Olmsted County courthouse, offering free legal representation and financial counseling to eligible tenants facing eviction. Members of the Mayo Clinic and IBM legal teams serve in a pro bono capacity. The Olmsted County Judiciary has been very supportive of the EPP, and has revised court calendars, developed new forms and documents, and educated judicial officers to accomplish the goals of the EPP.

The project has seen great success in helping tenants maintain their housing or moving to a new home with the eviction being expunged. Positive relationships have been created with opposing landlords and attorneys. In 2019, Olmsted County had 514 eviction cases. More than 72% of the tenants appearing at court were assisted by the EPP.

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