

Washington State Office of Civil Legal Aid (OCLA) Race Equity and Justice Initiative (REJI) Statement of Purpose

I. Introduction

The work of OCLA has never been more vital. Recognizing that “the provision of civil legal aid services to indigent persons is an important component of the state's responsibility to provide for the proper and effective administration of civil and criminal justice,” the Washington State Legislature established OCLA in 2005 to manage the then-small state investment in civil legal aid services to low-income people in Washington State. In the years since the Legislature has greatly expanded the scope of OCLA’s responsibilities.

At this distinctive moment in time, the urgency of civil legal aid services is combined with the lingering impacts of the pandemic and the disturbing reality that we operate in a law and justice system historically grounded in racism and that, as the Washington State Supreme Court unanimously observed in its [June 4, 2020 Open Letter to the Legal Community](#), has time and again has administered justice differentially depending on the racial identities of those involved.

Historically a very small agency, OCLA is in an intensive growth stage. To implement the range of new responsibilities assigned by the Legislature, we set out to create this REJI statement of purpose to guide the work. Recognizing the importance of this plan for this phase of OCLA’s evolution, the organization invested in a careful and thoughtful process spanning six months of planning. Working with a team of consultants, the work began with a discovery phase to identify barriers and opportunities to develop an internal equity plan to guide agency operations, staff expansion, succession planning, and all aspects of the agency’s external work, including approaches to resource development, investment, contracting, oversight, and communications.

In the end, the planning process itself became as important as this product. Before entering the practical work planning phase, the effort was made through regular staff meetings and an all-day virtual staff retreat to invest in defining and promoting a culture of listening, learning, and action as individuals and as a team. An outcome of the process included a sense of shared purpose about the changes needed to live into REJI objectives and newly articulated core values for OCLA.

As an initial subscriber of the [Washington Race Equity and Justice Acknowledgments and Commitments](#) (WaREJI), we utilized the work planning approach mapped out in the comprehensive WaREJI toolkit. This REJI statement of purpose is a result of those efforts and acts as a roadmap for the work ahead.

II. OCLA REJI WHY

WHO WE ARE:

Washington's Office of Civil Legal Aid (OCLA) is an essential part of our law and justice system's commitment to equity and justice for low-income people and communities throughout our state. The core value underlying this commitment is that everyone belongs within the circle of human concern¹, and that our law and justice systems must not allow or perpetuate the denial of access to and fair treatment of members of groups historically harmed by that system. OCLA operates as an independent entity within the judicial branch of our state government.

OUR CORE VALUES:

An outcome of the REJI planning process led to the following articulation of the organization's core values. Our work will be guided and informed by our beliefs and commitments to:

1. **Equity + Inclusion:** We seek to cultivate equity and inclusion by creating an environment where everyone with whom and on whose behalf we engage experiences a sense of belonging and value, and has fair access and opportunity to the law and justice systems with which we are engaged.
2. **Leadership:** We seek to be visionary leaders who use OCLA's authority, influence, and institutional credibility to help cultivate a civil justice system that delivers justice and serves the commitments outlined in the Supreme Court's June 4, 2020 Open Letter and the agency's commitment to racial equity and justice. We strive to nurture an internal environment of inclusive, independent, and interdependent thinking, professional growth, and collaboration.
3. **Transparency + Accountability:** We are committed to developing authentic relationships with the communities we serve and support grounded in accountability, transparency, and clear communication.

¹ Circle of Human Concern created by [Professor John Powell of the Othering and Belonging Institute](#) is a core framework used in the WAREJI Commitments

4. Change + Innovation: We will actively embrace change by being flexible, inclusive, and future-focused, challenging the status quo (not accepting the system as a given), forging empowered community partnerships and providing resources to support and sustain innovation in effective, community-directed legal aid delivery.

HOW WE CARRY OUT THE OCLA MISSION:

1. OCLA underwrites, supports, and oversees the effective pro-equity delivery of civil legal services to low-income people throughout the State of Washington. OCLA prioritizes the civil legal needs of communities most harmed by poverty and lack of access to essential health, social, educational, and economic opportunities, services and support. This is because access to civil justice can mitigate and interrupt poverty-driven harms and suffering, including disproportionate contact with juvenile, child welfare, eviction, and criminal justice systems.

2. OCLA identifies law and justice system practices, policies, and biases that cause or perpetuate differential treatment and disproportionate outcomes for poor communities, especially those harmed by structural racism. Based on this knowledge, we help facilitate the changes necessary to transform existing systems that cause or perpetuate disproportionate harms and injustice.

3. OCLA ensures rigorous stewardship of public funding, consistent with racial equity and justice goals.

OCLA'S REJI COMMITMENT²:

1. Consistent with our [Supreme Court's June 4, 2020 Statement](#), the OCLA team acknowledges that we operate in and are part of a law and justice system grounded in racism and affirming the supremacy of members of one race above those of all others. It has and continues to systematically dehumanize and oppress Black, Indigenous and other Communities of Color (BIPOC), as well as other socially disfavored groups.

2. Along with the nine justices on our Supreme Court, the OCLA team recognizes the destructive impact of racism and racist systems on our collective commitment to equity, fairness, and justice.

² Race Equity and Justice Initiative, www.wareji.org

3. The OCLA team acknowledges the need to actively link the ways that poverty and target identities³ of communities experiencing disproportionate harm intersect. Intersectionality increases the harmful effects of discrimination—including the harms inflicted by racism, ableism, misogyny, anti-immigrant, and other forms of devaluing certain groups.
4. The OCLA team will work with the Supreme Court, Office of Public Defense, the courts, and other court support organizations, participants in the broader law and justice system, and partners from communities most harmed by poverty and structural racism, to transform a legal system that historically and consistently drives disproportionately detrimental outcomes for those harmed by systemic practices that intersect with immigration status, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability to create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.
5. The OCLA team prioritizes serving those who are denied equity and justice and/or who have limited ability to enforce their rights by virtue of our current inequitable legal system.
6. The quality and way the civil legal assistance we underwrite is delivered to low-income people has a profound impact on their lives. We recognize the existence of intergenerational trauma in communities harmed by the dominant power structure. We affirm that underwriting cultural and trauma-informed approaches to legal aid delivery is essential to disrupting the oppressive patterns of the past, and for fidelity to OCLA's mission.

III. DESIRED IMPACT

These high-level and strategic impact measures will guide the metrics to be analyzed, tracked, and transparently shared both internally and externally:

1. OCLA contractors understand the agency's REJI strategy and expectation that they abide by these principles as part of their work with us.
2. REJI core competencies are established and upheld among OCLA leadership, staff, and contractors and incorporated into policies and procedures promulgated by OCLA.
3. Disaggregated and strategic demographic data and impact metrics are collected, analyzed, and transparently shared both internally and externally.

³ Based on the work of Leticia Nieto's [Agent/Target Rank](#) and Addressing Model for understanding social identities ([page 16 in the REJI toolkit](#))

4. Ongoing and timely input, guidance and feedback is based on durable relationships with and accountability to communities most harmed by structural racism, compounded by poverty and other forms of structural bias.
5. OCLA will identify and overcome barriers to effective investment in and support of equity informed services.

IV. OCLA REJI OBJECTIVES (2022-24)

1. Incorporate race equity and justice culture and practice into day-to-day agency operations; employ a culture that promotes listening, learning, and action as individuals and as a team.
2. Make meaningful changes to ensure OCLA's staff composition reflects its commitments and ensuring that individuals and organizations receiving OCLA funds embed and act on the same commitment to recruiting, hiring, retaining, and ensuring promotional opportunities for staff from non-dominant cultural and racial communities.
3. Employ REJI commitments as a template for all aspects of the agency's external work, including approaches to resource development, investment, contracting, oversight, and communications.

V. ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE WORK

1. All efforts are aligned with existing [WAREJI Commitments](#) adopted by OCLA and the Civil Legal Aid Oversight Committee in 2018.
2. The vast majority of the people served by OCLA contractors are coming from situations where they have already experienced institutional or systemic oppression, or system involvement.
3. Because of race, ethnicity, gender/gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status and other factors, many communities have disproportionately experienced the harsh consequences of the pandemic and are experiencing a disproportionate number of civil legal problems as a result that will continue to do so long after the pandemic state of emergency ends.
4. An all-staff REJI Team will initially lead this work, building on the 2021-22 REJI Team sessions and retreat that established a more intentional organizational culture, including a set of core OCLA values, conflict identification and resolution. As OCLA continues to grow, we will need to designate a core team to hold us accountable as an agency to this effort.

5. The work is challenging, and everyone comes from very different sets of racial, ethnic, social, religious, cultural, familial, professional, and lived traditions and experiences. We seek to stay in the “learning zone” and strive to get more comfortable with being uncomfortable. We also commit to finding resources to support community care and resilience in members of the OCLA team.

6. BIPOC and white people have experienced race and racism in the U.S. differently, and therefore, their work towards racial justice, including the emotional labor necessary to progress, is different.

7. As a state funder and underwriter, OCLA carries specific fiduciary and accountability responsibilities to low-income communities, the Legislature, and taxpayers, all while maintaining fidelity to law and justice system core values. While OCLA shares those core values and commitments with its contractors, its role as a funder can lead to tension because the contract relationship carries differing roles as well as differential power and authority.

8. OCLA recently expanded with the addition of five new statewide programs. The agency will continue to grow consistent with legislative directives. OCLA is bringing an intentional and consistent race equity analysis to all these efforts.