

INFORMATION FOR RELEASE

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Three Legal Aid Society Attorneys Selected for Groundbreaking Race-Equity Training Program

Legal Aid Society attorneys will focus research on racial inequality amid school discipline

NASHVILLE, Tenn., June 22, 2016—[Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland](#)s, in conjunction with the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, announced today that three of Legal Aid Society's staff attorneys have been selected to participate in the 2016 Racial Justice Training Institute (RJTI). RJTI is a national training program that increases the capacity of those advocating for low-income people, allowing them to deploy up-to-date racial justice advocacy skills that address the role racism plays in causing and perpetuating poverty.

The Legal Aid Society attorneys participating in the program are **Patricia Jones**, of Legal Aid Society's Columbia office; **Samuel Keen**, of Legal Aid Society's Clarksville office; and **Marla Williams**, managing attorney of Legal Aid Society's Cookeville office. Jones, Keen and Williams are three of 41 Fellows from across the nation invited to participate in the program. They are the first, and currently only, participants from Tennessee.

"RJTI puts race front and center in the fight for equal justice," said Ellen Hemley, vice president of advocate resources & training at the Shriver Center. "As recent events throughout our country have painfully shown, it is more important now than ever to understand and address issues of race and implicit bias when advancing justice for marginalized communities."

"We are proud of Marla, Sam and Patricia for taking important leadership roles in combatting such a serious and systemic problem like racial inequality," said Gary Housepian, executive director of Legal Aid Society. "The skills and knowledge our attorneys gain from RJTI will be invaluable towards building the capacity of our organization to achieve justice for the clients

and communities we serve. We must build healthier lives and communities—we all benefit from racial justice.”

Following the six-month-long training, the 2016 Fellows will join a growing national alumni network of advocates working to advance a coordinated racial justice agenda. Specifically, the Fellows from Legal Aid Society will focus their efforts on researching disparate expulsions, suspensions and disciplinary actions among students.

“The United States Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights has produced research that reveals that students of certain racial or ethnic groups and students with disabilities are disciplined at far higher rates than their peers, beginning in preschool. The data also show that an increasing number of students are losing important instructional time due to exclusionary discipline,” Housepian said. “We must identify why this continues to happen and learn how, as an organization and a society, we can address and rectify this problem so that these young people can succeed in their lives.”

Entering its third year, RJTI has trained 80 advocates from 42 organizations in 19 states. This alumni network continues to work in concert on several issues, including education equity and fair housing. RJTI Fellows have also provided innovative advocacy approaches and civil litigation strategies in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

“Our Fellows emerge from the program ready to help shape policies and build the future for a racially just society,” Hemley added. “The real work starts after RJTI.”

The Racial Justice Training Institute is made possible by the generous support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Pritzker Foundation.

Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberlands advocates for fairness and justice under the law. The non-profit law firm offers free civil legal representation and educational programs to help people in its region receive justice, protect their well-being and support opportunities to overcome poverty. It serves 48 counties from offices in Clarksville, Columbia, Cookeville, Gallatin, Murfreesboro, Nashville, Oak Ridge and Tullahoma. Legal Aid Society is funded in part by United Way. Learn more at www.las.org, or by following the firm on [Facebook](#).

The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law provides national leadership in advancing laws and policies that secure justice to improve the lives and opportunities of people living in poverty. Specializing in practical solutions, they advocate for and serve clients directly, while also increasing the capacity of the nation’s legal aid providers to advance justice and opportunity for their clients. www.povertylaw.org

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