

# Why now? Year one of the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance

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Why now? Why has it been important over the last year to build a national network of firms ranging in size from two lawyers to 10,000 lawyers focused on dismantling racism in the law?

Just past the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance's (LFAA) one-year anniversary, we are taking a look back and a look ahead to make sure this alliance of nearly 300 law firms, large and small, in every state in the country and beyond, stays true to its purpose and mission.

From the earliest moments of plotting out what the LFAA might aspire to do, "why now?" is what has been asked of us — and rightly so. The fact is there is no great answer to the question, "why now?" which really asks, "why not before?"

The real answer is that law firms should have always been invested in working together to dismantle racism in the law.

## Building a strong alliance

Many law firms have longstanding pro bono programs and partnerships with legal services organizations that allow them to dedicate resources to assisting pro bono clients with the manifestations and symptoms of racism in their lives, and some individual law firms have taken on larger-scale impact work that results in a chip in the system of racist laws that support the racial injustice we see all around us. But before now, law firms have not looked at the resources that run through and across their institutions and asked, "how might we collaboratively direct our pro bono work toward the systems and roots in our law that create the injustice we feel and see around us?"

It took the murder of George Floyd, and a summer of national protest, but we finally arrived at, "why not now?"

One of the things that LFAA has been crystal clear about from the beginning is that the law firm role in the battle for racial justice is that of supporting actor. There are legal services organizations, civil rights organizations, community-based organizations and race equity advocates that have always been focused on doing this work — every day, for years, with expertise and heroic commitment. We know that we will do more, better, and effective work when we are guided by the experts and when we listen to them about what they need from us.

We also know that we must approach this work in a humble manner — not only welcoming collaboration, but also remaining open to

critique. There will be missteps along the way; however, inaction cannot be an option. Dismantling racism in the law requires that law firms see that work as their own as well. And now that we have arrived at this moment, finding ways to not only follow, but also to lead as outspoken sponsors of taking apart racism that is institutionalized in our laws, courts, and the experiences of people seeking to access real justice, is demanded.

Holding this understanding close, members of the Association of Pro Bono Counsel and a group of managing partners of a number of law firms, began strategizing about how to add the muscle of the private bar to the strength of the legal services and civil rights efforts. Questions of "how do we organize?" and "who do we organize?" and "what do we aim to do?" began to emerge.

Our first answer was, there is unfortunately enough work for all of us to do for a very long time, so everyone who raises their hand to help is in. We set out to construct a marquee-sized tent and invite any law firm interested in dismantling racism in the law in to help. We recognized that everyone and every law firm will join at a different point in a journey toward understanding the value of an antiracist justice system — and we focused on acknowledging that difference by making one of our tent poles foundational and ongoing training in systemic racism and cultural humility. We came to understand that conveying to our volunteers how we show up to do the work is as important as facilitating the work we do.

LFAA was established as a separate, formalized nonprofit entity to make sure that there is structure and infrastructure to keep law firms laser-focused on finding ways to direct their resources and energy toward work that will undermine racism in the law. And, to make sure that focus survives beyond a summer of protests and carries on when law firms are busy or challenged in other ways.

LFAA aspires to encourage law firms to continue their pro bono work in support of individuals who have experienced racism, while expanding the pro bono work that law firms do to regularly and intentionally include changing the laws that create the conditions that allow racism to go unchecked. We are eyes wide open that LFAA and its Alliance Firms will be needed in different ways, in different places, at different times because of the distribution of legal services resources and the challenges we hope to take on. We are dedicated to maintaining an alliance that prioritizes relationships with legal services organizations and that amplifies the voices of people of color.

## Leveraging a broad alliance

As law firms joined LFAA one by one at a rapid clip, we began to see the outlines of a national network emerge. With that momentum, we began to see possibility beyond the goal of dismantling racism in the law by law firms that were familiar players in the collaborative Big Law pro bono landscape to one that included firms that could be nimble in different ways because of their geographic locations and areas of expertise.

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There was a glimmer of expanding law firm pro bono resources — not just doing a different type of root-level legal work but doing it anywhere there is a need. And with that glimmer came an intentional strategy that encouraged us to think a little more thoughtfully about the layered reasons it might be a game changer to make sure that LFAA has a network of law firms of all sizes in every state in the country.

We are putting what we think is different about this endeavor and this network to the test as we try to add value to the work of legal services organizations and race equity advocates who are taking on age-old issues that are certainly woven into our national fabric, but in many cases are hyper local in the way they are reinforced and impact the daily lives of people of color. Voting rights is one arena

where the significance of having a vast and varied network of firms that are committed to LFAA's mission is proving useful.

While there is meaningful and important legislation at the federal level that has the potential to make positive change, fast-moving, harmful attacks on democracy are happening in state legislatures throughout the country. These efforts have ambitions to wrench core election functions away from election officials and threaten them with criminal penalties — these efforts are hand in glove with complementary efforts to throw calculated obstacles in the way of people of color as they make their way to the polls.

Arresting this march toward voter suppression and partisan control of elections requires a deep and first-hand understanding of local politics, state constitutions and other levers of influence. LFAA is building a network of local, regional, national and international firms that can bring both the hometown insight and connections of local firms and the large-scale resources of the biggest firms in the world to the fight.

## Energizing a dedicated alliance

Now, the question for LFAA is “what’s next?” Each Alliance Firm has expressed a commitment to dismantling racism in the law. All Alliance Firms are working together to expressly understand and name the role that racism plays in the law and to use that knowledge to fight back. Alliance Firms are taking on pro bono work across the country facilitated by LFAA's conversations with legal services organization and racial justice experts. LFAA's work is underway.

The coming months will include continuing cultural humility trainings for our volunteers, intensified voting rights work, a deepening dive on responsible policing, contributing to mitigating the predicted housing crisis, efforts to protect the ability of educators to teach our children about the meaning of race today and in our country's history, and planning for our annual summit.

What's next? LFAA and its Alliance Firms have to stay the course, build trust, and push ourselves to make more antiracist choices, not just in our pro bono efforts, but in all aspects of our work, individually and collectively.

## About the authors



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