

The Law Firm Antiracism Alliance: Maintaining Momentum

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As we begin a new year, law firms are evaluating their successes, opportunities and challenges. Among those considerations is how a focus on racial justice fits in to what has been accomplished and what might be achieved.

The Law Firm Antiracism Alliance (LFAA), an alliance of 300 law firms committed to encouraging law firms to do more to create racial equity in the law and racial justice in our country, is tuned into the fact that there are so many things to care about, worry about, adjust to and focus on right now.

That said, we want to be clear. The fight for racial justice remains as important as ever and the need is immediate. We have momentum. We have a clearer understanding of what is possible.

LFAA is not slowing down. We are committed to not letting law firms look away nor be silent. The end of our first full calendar year as an organization—and more

importantly—as an alliance of the private bar poised to do more, gives us a moment to reflect on how we continue.

As rational, optimistic, pragmatic organizers, how do we stay the course and keep the hearts, minds and eyes of the private bar on racial justice—while acknowledging that this is tough and the road is long? How do we in the private bar continue racial justice work in a productive way? We have learned a few things in our efforts so far.

Follow and Lead

We are an organization that has set out to lift up the work of legal services organizations and racial justice advocates, and one that holds dear the importance of amplifying the voices of communities of color. But it is not enough for us to say we will always sit back and wait for someone else to tell us what we need to know or do. We have to navigate leading and following in a humble, informed way.

This means that LFAA's focus on building awareness of how racial justice work intersects with other substantive issues of the law and



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lived experience is as important as the legal work we are doing—and that our commitment to deepening our Alliance Firms' knowledge about systemic racism must be informed by experts, but not a burden on others to coordinate. This ties into our continuing focus on cultural humility and being in constant conversation with people and organizations that have been historically and singularly focused on racial justice.

It also means that we have to initiate, coordinate and facilitate the spaces and moments where the private bar can be educated and be in conversation with people and organizations that will do that teaching.

We have to ask for the guidance we need and make it comfortable and worthwhile for racial justice

experts to engage with us. And, once we know what our value add is and where our work is needed, we have to organize ourselves to do the work.

We are pushing LFAA and our Alliance Firms to be in a position to follow and lead by growing our relationships across the country with experts on racial justice, hosting conversations on critical and timely issues and serving in leadership roles when our work and voice can help advance racial equity—with the corresponding requirement that our leaders will be informed, engaged and will prioritize supportive relationships with those on the front lines of racial justice work.

Be Specific

Doing antiracist work effectively means that we have to leverage LFAA's connections with people within law firms who know how to manage volunteer workforces made up of attorneys and professional staff.

What we know from these pro bono professionals is that people who care about issues and want to do something have to have a specific thing to do. It is not enough to build awareness and inform Alliance Firms—we must have impact-focused opportunities for Alliance Firms to direct their energy where legal services organizations tell us our resources are needed.

To that end, alongside the leadership of the Association of Pro Bono Counsel (APBCo), LFAA responded to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland's call to action to make attorneys across the country

more aware of the probable eviction crisis that has been exacerbated by the end of eviction moratoria.

Our pro bono forward organizations worked in partnership with advisers from the White House and Department of Justice, the president of the Legal Services Corp.—and, as always—advocates from legal services organizations to explain the scope of the issues and available help that lawyers can connect tenants and landlords to in order to stave off the worst of the crisis.

LFAA ensured that the discussion of housing was understood as a racial justice issue. Following the training in September, APBCo and LFAA engaged in a nationwide survey of legal services organizations to best know where to send our volunteer workforces to assist with delivering Emergency Rental Assistance to those who need it most.

That is not where LFAA will stop. Our mission is to dismantle systemic racism in the law. While we are at the ready to assist legal services organizations to systematically deliver immediate solutions, we are also mindful that Band-aids are not enough. Our aim is to continue working with experts in housing to root out the laws and policies that allow a crisis like this to emerge—one with a disproportionate effect on communities of color.

Beyond that, our hope is that Alliance Firms that have expressed a commitment to antiracist work will now use their growing understanding of the intersections of housing and systemic racism as



Protestors march from Foley Square over the Brooklyn Bridge to rally over the death of George Floyd

motivation to be more involved in all aspects of improving housing for low-income communities of color.

LFAA was intentionally built to have a broad mandate and to focus on the intersections of systemic racism and issues ranging from access to justice to voting rights. In addition to a focus on housing, volunteers from Alliance Firms are now engaged in work related to the right to protest, regulation of families and reproductive justice, the impact of the tax system on communities of color, police reform, attacks on accurate historical education, the ongoing effect of Jim Crow juries and beyond.

Each time a legal services organization or racial justice advocate identifies systemic racism in the law, LFAA asks its volunteers to figure out what we can do to help.

Build Community

Community and connection create more dialogue, more commitment and more engagement. This truth has been affirmed by Alliance Firms and participating volunteers. It is heartening to hear—particularly from newer lawyers and professional staff.

There is gratefulness about having an opportunity to do antiracist pro bono work, but in addition to that, being in regular conversation with people from firms of all sizes across the country makes it apparent that there is a way for law firms to be a part of a movement to end racism in the law. The boundaries between law firms disappear when we hone in on shared values—there is power in that.

LFAA is also tuned into the ebb and flow of our community. Through weekly open forums, ongoing educational sessions and an annual summit, our focus on creating more connections to sustain attention on systemic racism remains top priority. Throughout these conversations the importance of amplifying the voices of communities of color remains a consistent priority. We know when we create connections between Alliance Firms, our mission, and racial justice advocates, we have a much better chance of keeping the spotlight on the work that needs to be done.

Make Difficult Work Accessible

For reasons that range from minute to major, and emotional to logistical, LFAA is aware that our volunteer work force will be affected by a multitude of draws on their ability to be involved. We are constantly thinking about how we stay connected to our volunteers and whatever challenges stand in the way of doing antiracist legal work.

LFAA is working to get beyond these obstacles with empathy, experience and perseverance. Our

expectation of LFAA's role is that we will create opportunities to be involved that are small and large, that are far-reaching and direct and that emphasize the ties between antiracist work and so many of the other issues that our volunteers care about.

LFAA wants our volunteers to understand that if they care about ending systemic racism and also care about immigration, reproductive rights or the environment and sustainability, they do not have to choose. If they care about excising racism from the legal system, choosing between antiracism and almost any other issue is a false choice.

People and law firms can care about intersecting issues and be effective here. Moreover, in a world where nearly every challenge faced has a negative and disproportionate impact on people of color, applying a racial justice lens to defining the problem and then proposing solutions leads to better and more lasting change.

Maintain the Momentum

We have to maintain the momentum we've built. But we are up against questions about inadequate resources, limited attention and constrained solutions. How do we grow what we have to give?

We are asking our volunteers to think about why our country was activated in a different way in 2020. Why, as one LFAA board member reports, in a liberal progressive community did Black Lives Matter signs line the streets a year ago, but

now have fallen down and have not been replaced? And, why does doing antiracist work matter yesterday, today and tomorrow?

We were energized by our annual summit that just took place in December 2021, where we gathered as a community of law firms, and also more deeply engaged with our legal services and public interest colleagues. Our hope is that coming together to mark the end of 2021 provided space to focus on what we know so far about the role of law firms in this work and the necessity of specificity, community and accessibility.

We hope that the momentum we need to not only continue but also advance the efforts of law firms to do something bolder and braver was affirmed by listening to the voices of experts and volunteers alike.

LFAA is at the beginning of its effort, and our lessons learned and work so far are pebbles in a pond, but just imagine what might be possible if hundreds of law firms sustain their course towards racial justice.

Brenna DeVaney and Kiisha Morrow are the co-presidents of the *Law Firm Antiracism Alliance*, a partnership of over 300 law firms working collaboratively with legal services organizations to address systemic racism in the law.