



NW Sidebar

The Voices of Washington's Legal Community



Distribution of Power: A Look at WSBA's Powerful Communities Project

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It began as an inkling that things could be done differently; not a full-blown dismantling of the status quo, but maybe just a little nudge could produce something better.

By the fall of 2019, that initial inkling had culminated in 14 community-based civil legal aid projects, providing free legal services, education, and access to hundreds of people in

communities that have historically been blocked from the justice system, unjustly targeted by it, or both. This was the kickoff of the WSBA Powerful Communities Project, a new program aimed at reaching under-served and underrepresented communities in Washington and, perhaps most importantly, developing deeper partnerships and relationships between legal service providers and the people they serve.

The Powerful Communities Project is one of the more recent manifestations of the WSBA mission “to serve the public and the members of the Bar, to ensure the integrity of the legal profession, and to champion justice.” It also takes a step toward meeting goals outlined in the State Plan for the Coordinated Delivery of Legal Aid to Low-Income People, a three-year plan to address gaps in Washington’s justice system. For example, there is inadequate funding for civil legal aid even as 70 percent of low-income households in Washington face at least one significant legal problem every year, yet the vast majority will never receive legal help or even understand that there are legal solutions to their challenges.

Traditionally, WSBA programs and support for local legal organizations like Minority Bar Associations (MBAs) and Qualified Legal Service Providers (QLSPs) were developed under a somewhat limiting structure and typically resulted in single-day free legal clinics. And while such clinics are helpful to people who can attend, they’re not always developed to address more fundamental needs of the communities they serve. This was one of the problems that led to the initial scoping of a new kind of WSBA program that would be more intentional in its outreach and less restrictive for providers, who have sometimes felt pigeon-holed in what they could do under earlier frameworks.

In 2018, WSBA Public Service Specialist Paige Hardy and WSBA Equity and Justice Manager Diana Singleton began meeting with legal aid providers and minority bar associations to get a better understanding of the needs of the communities they serve, and began identifying ways the WSBA could support their work. This consequently included supporting newer, more innovative projects to address the needs of underserved communities throughout the state. The result was the initial rollout of the Powerful Communities Project, which distributed funding for projects aimed at underserved and underrepresented communities, both geographically and demographically.

Compared to some of what’s been done in the past, the Powerful Communities Project differs in two key ways: a wider range of providers would have more freedom to develop creative solutions, and to be selected they are required to work in partnership—from the project proposal to its creation and implementation and beyond—with the communities they intend to serve.

“Our goal is that each year we assess the program to make sure that it is accessible, inclusive, and actually serving communities through the projects that the Powerful Communities Project funds,” Hardy said.

Fourteen projects received funds for their projects in 2019. In total, \$29,400 was distributed from the nonprofit public charity, the [Washington State Bar Foundation](#), which last year directed \$275,000 toward public service and diversity and inclusion programs (no WSBA member fees were used to support Powerful Communities projects).

The organizations behind these projects rolled out direct legal aid, educational events, new legal clinics, volunteer lawyer recruitment, and more to help address the legal needs of low-income people who experience marginalization by the legal system. The emphasis on community partnerships was intended to empower community-led groups and projects, rather than assuming that lawyers know best. The projects encompassed legal support for Native American tribal members, parents of Latinx students, refugees, and many more underrepresented and underserved Washingtonians.

“We recognize the incredible movement work that communities are already doing,” Hardy said, emphasizing the intention to empower community groups with more access and knowledge about the legal system. “We’re trying to provide funding to help organizations do that work, do that outreach.”

Participants in the 2019 Powerful Communities Project have since wrapped their initial work and reported the results. Nearly all have said these projects were only a first step toward long-term goals, and many intend to apply again to build on what they and their community partners accomplished so far.

“The goal is to build community-based relationships,” Hardy said. “To develop power will take ongoing support.”

Apply for Powerful Communities

This year, the WSBA is once again accepting applications for the Powerful Community Project. MBAs, QLSPs, and nonprofit organizations partnering with nonprofit legal organizations are encouraged to apply for up to \$3,000 toward their projects. Visit the [Powerful Communities Project page](#) to learn more, [review the project grading criteria](#), and [apply online](#).

About the Author

Colin Rigley. Colin worked as a print news journalist and editor in California, as well as a content strategist in the Puget Sound area, before joining WSBA as the communications specialist this month. He can be reached at colinr@wsba.org.

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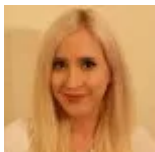
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