

**2021 Law School Access to Justice Conference**  
**Fighting Systemic Racism: Law School and Community Partnerships**

**2B. Housing Advocacy Through Clinics and Community Partners: Fast and Furious Demands, Towering Obstacles, and Teaching Moments**

Michaela Azemi: Welcome to the afternoon session of the Law School Access to Justice Conference. My name is Michaela Azemi. I am the pro bono director and externship director at Cornell Law School.

I was particularly struck by today's keynote speaker—Dean Archer's words this morning imploring us to join the fight to dismantle racist structures in our lives, noting that our livelihoods and happiness are deeply impacted by where we call home.

Today's distinguished panel of housing advocates will share their unique and successful models of community and school partnerships working toward change through a racial justice lens.

Before we jump in today, just a couple housekeeping items for you. If you could please stay on mute, we would appreciate it. The panelists will be spotlighted but if you'd like you can turn it to speaker view. And I want to let you know that this session is being recorded, and please enter your questions in the chat. And if you have a specific question for a particular panelist, please note that in the chat as well. And we will answer the questions in the chat at the end of the session; we've left some time for that. We will do our best to answer all your questions. If we do not get to your question, we plan to have an FAQ, which will be uploaded to the website after the fact, so we will eventually get to everyone's questions.

Thank you so much. From now, I will turn the floor over to Sharon Stapel to introduce herself and discuss her project. Thank you.

Sharon Stapel: Thank you Michaela. Good afternoon everyone. I'm Sharon Stapel. I am the Executive Director of Legal Hand, and I'm delighted to be here to listen to everyone, to learn from everyone, and to talk with all of you today.

Legal Hand's mission is to expand access to justice through nonlawyer volunteers working with hard-to-reach communities to provide warm-welcoming, zero-barrier access to civil legal information and resources. Legal Hand works to increase access to justice by making information resources and referrals more accessible to community members who have faced historical barriers—many of which we've heard about this morning—to accessing this information, particularly communities of color and poor communities. Legal hand provides community members with information and assistance to help resolve problems in their lives like employment, housing, family, immigration, domestic violence, and public benefits. Our goal is to prevent problems from turning into legal cases before they have negative consequences on the people who reach out to us and their families and thereby create healthier, more stable lives and neighborhoods as well as lessen the number of unrepresented litigants in court.

At legal hand, trained community volunteers who are not lawyers provide this information, and our values include that all our assisted, regardless of income, immigration status, or residence; that no appointments are necessary; that there are no eligibility requirements to receive information from us; that all are welcomed and treated with respect; that we are open, in addition to weekday hours, on evenings and weekends; and that we further the contribution that nonlawyers can make to expand access to justice.

Legal Hand has five neighborhood storefront centers in New York City, where we saw 25,000 people in the first five years we were open. When the pandemic hit, we could no longer use the storefront center model, and we had to pivot to a virtual call-in center model, which we launched for Long Island.

We wanted to be a lifeline for communities, a place to turn when they didn't know where their next step was. We also wanted to recreate the warmth and community connection that our neighborhood storefront centers had, where the visitors (we call the folks who come to legal handsets visitors) are treated like neighbors but not like our clients. To do this we built a custom online platform where people can reach us by phone, text, chat, email, and video. We also built a custom database that has resources relevant to the

communities we serve. We recruited, listened to, and incorporated the advice of our nonlawyer volunteers who have lived experience with homelessness, disability, and other issues that our visitors might also have. We helped create the information and resources that would be relevant to our visitors. We provided all of our volunteers with laptops so that they could access our platform, even if they did not have their own computer, and so they can do that confidentially. And we also provided them with training so that they could be a resource, not just to the visitors who called us or texted us or emailed or chatted us but also for themselves, their friends, their families, and their communities.

In launching the call center, we also partnered with Hofstra Law School and Judge Fern Fisher's access-to-justice class. And those students served as volunteers, working with visitors to assess their issues, explore resources and options with them, and give them information that informed their next steps, including resources and referrals to legal and non-legal organizations. Our job really is to get the word out to communities about what is available to them and assess what's happening on the ground so that we can get that information out to folks. We give as much information to as many people as possible, starting with our volunteers. And many of our volunteers are community organizers themselves and help to push information out about Legal Hand and the resources that we have, as well as shipping that information.

Hofstra volunteers also helped us contact local school boards and town boards throughout Long Island so that those organizations, both the schools and the local government that people were likely to turn to during the pandemic, could refer to the call-in center. We partnered with four more groups, like the access-to-justice committees, volunteer organizations active in disasters, and pro-ad groups to make sure that we learned from and gave information to these groups. We also reached out to politicians, religious leaders, and governmental agencies to encourage them to send people to Legal Hand centers.

We are considered a hub for disseminating information to hard-to-reach communities. And we've served hundreds of visitors during the pandemic and since January of 2021 when we launched the call-

in center, providing them with information about housing, such as the eviction moratorium or emergency rental assistance program funding; family issues, like school, custody, and child-support issues; consumer taxes stimulus check—those kinds of issues; and employment, particularly unemployment insurance information.

As I mentioned, we formally launched the phone center in January of this year. And each month, we have seen our calls, text chats, and emails increase exponentially, suggesting that people need access to easy-to-contact, no-barrier information at a point where they have a problem that is not yet a legal issue, and they don't know what to do next.

We think that this community center initiative has been successful both because of the growth that we've been seeing each month and also because our community center approach seems to be working as many of our visitors express their appreciation for the way that we are open, accessible, and friendly and tell us that they feel comfortable talking with us about what they need when they don't know where to go next.

So that's a little bit about Legal Hand, and I'll be back to talk more later in the session. But, for now, I'm going to pass it on to Norrinda.

Norrinda Hayat: Hi everyone. Thank you so much for being here, and I look forward to this conversation with all of you.

I am a professor of law at Rutgers Law School in Newark, and I also direct the Civil Justice Clinic at the law school. The Civil Justice Clinic in its current iteration has two main substantive focuses: one is social benefits, which is headed up by my colleague John Dubin, and then there's the housing section of the Civil Justice Clinic, which I head up.

Many law schools have clinics and ours, like other law schools, brings students who have not yet graduated into a close relationship with their professors. So we would generally have eight to twelve law students in our clinic. In this case, because we litigate

cases, there are all of these students (our third-year students) who are eligible to practice in New Jersey state and federal courts.

And in the housing section, we provide free legal services to residents of New Jersey. In our case, it's primarily for Central Jersey and up because our sister law school in Camden tends to handle Central New Jersey and further south. But we can take cases that are anywhere in New Jersey. And those tend to be in the landlord-tenant area but also in fair housing. I have a deep background in fair housing from having practiced at the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department for almost a decade, and so we also do fair-housing work in the landlord-tenant instances. This is work that we do for those who are below the poverty line. And in the fair housing space, we are also not inclined to take cases where people are above the median, but we are more flexible there if people are looking for homes. But there's such a deep need for both of these kinds of work in in New Jersey.

For those of you who are not familiar with Rutgers, especially in Newark, we have a deep, deep history of social-justice work at the law school, coming out of the uprisings that happened in Newark during the 1960s. Rutgers Law School was once and continues to be (depending on what circle you're in) known as the people's electric law school. And in that frame, in following in that history of activism, the Civil Justice Clinic continues to try to not only take one-off cases (if a tenant comes to the law school and needs help defending against wrongful conviction, let's say), but also engage in thinking systematically about how residents of New Jersey, but especially in Newark, are being dispossessed.

And today, sitting the day after the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa massacre, I just want to name and lift up the survivors of that awful history who have testified over and over again before Congress, calling for reparations. The fight that is Tulsa continues on in many of our cities, including Newark.

And what we were most concerned about during the pandemic (and we'll talk about this more with respect to historic residents of Newark) is land possession. The foreclosure crisis of the mid-2000s dispossessed many people of the homes that their families had held

for generations. Newark right now is 88% renter occupied, and that represents the housing base of many historic residents— unfortunately—right now. What the pandemic threatened to do was even take those tenants out of Newark altogether. And what we were concerned about with respect to evictions (and if there was not to be an eviction moratorium in place) was that those historic residents would not only no longer own their homes but would be forced out of Newark altogether.

And so, in thinking about our work as a community partner—as a long-term community partner—and wanting to make sure that Newark was still going to be available to its historic residents once the pandemic ended, we tried to continue to do this work of helping folks maintain their housing through the pandemic so that the historic residents of Newark could still call the city home. I hope that we've done that.

With the aid of the federal government and the state government moratoriums, the CDC moratorium, and Governor Murphy's moratorium, we were helped. But we'll talk later in our discussion about what we did in the early days of the pandemic to try to make sure that the residents of Newark were secure in their housing until larger efforts could be put into place. So, again, I'm so thankful to be here, and I look forward to having this conversation.

Sateesh Nori: Thank you so much, Norrinda. Good morning, everyone. I hope you can hear me. I'm Sateesh Nori. I'm the Attorney-in-Charge of the Queen's Neighborhood Office of the Legal Aid Society. I'm also a clinical adjunct professor at NYU Law School, and I'm also on the board of JustFix.nyc.

This past year JustFix launched a digital tool for tenants to file repair cases directly from their smartphones. JustFix also created an online hardship declaration tool, which allowed tenants to keep at bay eviction proceedings if they'd demonstrated hardship.

At Legal Aid, I oversee a staff of 30 housing lawyers and paralegals who work with tenants. We handle almost 2,500 housing matters each year.

At NYU, I co-teach the Housing Rights Clinic, for which we just completed our sixth semester. We represent Queens tenants in housing court on eviction and repair cases. I also work with Columbia Law School's Lawyering in the Digital Age Clinic. This past year we worked on a project called the Justice Tablet, and I'm really excited to be here today to talk about that as well as what I've learned this year and how I hope to use this knowledge to be a better teacher and better advocate for my clients. So I turn it back over to Michaela, and I look forward to hearing from all of you today. Thank you.

Norrinda Hayat: I actually don't see Michaela. She may have had technical difficulties.

Sateesh Nori: Okay, so why don't I jump in here. So the first part of our talk is going to be about how we engaged with partners in housing and racial justice advocacy at the beginning of the pandemic. And so I'm going to turn it over to Norrinda to please discuss that topic.

Norrinda Hayat: Thank you. So, as I alluded to in my earlier remarks, in the early days of the pandemic, myself and other members of the clinic were very concerned about making sure that folks had a place to live during the pandemic. We had to shelter in place. We needed clean water. People needed to not be on the street. That was the first thing—but also the long-term effects of the pandemic. If evictions had been able to proceed, they would have reduced the historic population.

And here I think it's important to note the racial demographics of Newark. Newark is 47% Black and 17% Hispanic. The population is 8.8% white, so it's a majority minority community with a total of 300,000 people. And, again, I mentioned that 22% of the housing stock is owner occupied, leaving the other 88% tenant occupied. The median income in Newark is \$35,000 a year. So we're talking about a high majority of low-income people of color who are the primary residents of Newark and would have been affected if there were no moratorium.

On March 9, 2020, Governor Murphy issued Executive Order 103, declaring the public health emergency, and calling for people to

shelter in place. Notably, he did not also issue an eviction moratorium, which was, in our view, a glaring error on his part. Advocates were wondering what to do about this and trying to think about using traditional methods, such as letter writing, calling to Trenton, and trying to use their connections to get on the governor's calendar, to get on the governor's agenda for the week to encourage him. But, if you can think back to those early days, everything was moving so quickly, but also we were all very afraid. And it seemed like any one more day was going to be too long, so we couldn't wait to get on his calendar. He's dealing with this unprecedented pandemic, and we couldn't wait two or three weeks to get on his calendar. Every day that eviction court continued to proceed we thought was a day too long.

In addition, many of you may have already been in landlord-tenant court, but, in Newark, it is in the basement, in the darkest, stuffiest, most-congested corner of the courthouse. And so hundreds of people are packed in there. Eviction court itself is a pandemic; it's a daily pandemic for many, many reasons. It doesn't feel comfortable. Every time I go in there, I almost feel ashamed, and I really wish I could leave because it's that uncomfortable of a space—intentionally or unintentionally. And so there's no way to distance in landlord-tenant court itself. So there were so many different aspects to why landlord-tenant court needed to stop.

With respect to partners, I had just been to a law conference in January where I heard from my colleague Emily Benfer about a Twitter storm that she had engaged in. And this is the beauty of conferences. Sometimes we think, "Conferences, who wants to go to them?" but we do get good ideas from conferences. And at this AALS conference, I heard Emily talk about a Twitter storm that she had let loose, and I thought there's no time better time to engage in this type of innovative advocacy than when you're stuck at home in the middle of a pandemic and need emergency action. So I thought, "I'm going to borrow from Emily's idea," which I had already told her I was going to do at the earliest possible moment. Who knew that moment would be three months later in this pandemic? And we worked together with students, not just our clinic students of which I've already said we only have a few—that would not be enough for a Twitter storm. And just to back up a



Twitter storm means that you're just going to onslaught whomever you're directing the storm at. And, in our case, we wanted to direct it at Mayor Ras Baraka and Governor Phil Murphy and ask them to issue this moratorium as soon as possible.

So, on March 13, we decided to engage in our Twitter storm, still having not heard from the Governor's Office about a moratorium. We partnered with the law professors, so I sent to all of my colleagues at the law school a request and some sample tweets for them to join us. All the law students posted on all of their various platforms where they connect with each other—not only the social justice groups but the affinity groups, including the Black Law Students Association at the law school—to get as many people as possible. But then the advocates that are our normal partners, we sent to them and said, "Join us in this. I know we're working on our letter, but why don't we try this as well? It can't hurt to work on multiple cylinders." And so the advocates issued their own statement requesting for their membership and their employees to join us in this Twitter storm. And we can't forget our Community ground partners who we partnered with: Homes for All in New Jersey and Compassionate New Jersey, which was forming out of the Ironbound Community Corporation. And we tried to give this information out to all of them. And all of us engaged in bombarding the governor at 3:30 on March 13 with these tweets calling for the moratorium.

He did issue the moratorium. I don't know. Eventually all states issued a moratorium, right? So I do think we save dates. And, again, if we think back to where we were, he would have gotten around to it—every governor did. But, in our view, any one day was too long. And so we had no indication that he was going to do it on the 13<sup>th</sup> or the 14<sup>th</sup>, and he did issue it after our Twitter storm. And so we consider that not only a win, but a lesson learned in terms of, in really novel situations, taking turns that are novel and not just sticking to our normal set of partners and not sticking to our normal routine and how we advocate.

So I'll stop there, and I hope we can discuss more about social media and innovative strategies to continue to use even after the pandemic ends.

Michaela Azemi: Thank you so much, Norrinda. Apologies, I got booted out there from my computer.

So just to backtrack a little bit, as I mentioned I'm from Cornell Law School, and my current role involves creating and implementing pro bono projects and experiential learning opportunities for law students. As a former legal aid attorney in upstate New York, I'm particularly focused on connecting the local community to projects that our students are working on and serving our community in meaningful ways.

And, as a member of our county's Access to Justice Committee, I listened over the past two years to community summits involving human service providers, nonprofits, religious leaders, shelters, local businesses, and government agencies. And at each summit, the housing crisis in Ithaca bubbled to the surface as a number one issue that disproportionately impacted people of color in our community, further exaggerated, of course, by the pandemic.

A 2018 independent study in the Ithaca City Court points out the jarring imbalance in evictions in our area. While, for example, the census data showed that 6% of the population is Black, the study revealed that 54% of those evicted in Ithaca City Court were Black, and less than 3% of those tenants had any legal representation. So this data alone made it clear that these evictions are not just a part and parcel to a bad actor landlord. It's not someone acting as an individual, but rather the result of race-based policies, including the lack of right to council, that have led to the systemic oppression in our area.

So after listening to these summits and connecting with our local stakeholders and community organizations, including the Ithaca Tenants' Union, I met with law-student activists on campus and a couple student organizations. And, as several of the plenary speakers noted, action is baseless without resources, and so we worked together to apply for a small grant (a seed grant) to help us create a tenant's hotline locally in Ithaca—something that we didn't have in place before. And, over the last year, the hotline has grown, and we've served over 300 local tenants with legal advice about

race and options. Working with law students and pro bono attorneys on this hotline really goes to this idea of going to the community and using technology (even technology as simple as a calling-in number) to be able to have people be served where they're at.

And so, in the fall of 2020, we took the work of the hotline from last summer—and the law school is extremely supportive—and created the Tenants Advocacy Practicum, which embedded the hotline into the curriculum and allowed us to deepen the work beyond just brief advice to include full-scope representation. So after further discussion with our community stakeholders and local legal aid organizations, including my former organization Law New York, we worked closely together on another grant application. We were fortunate to receive a million-dollar grant to provide longevity for the tenants legal hotline, to fund the practicum over the next three years, to create a new post-graduate fellowship, to fund eight summer law students each summer to work exclusively on these housing issues in our community, and to fund a student-led eviction monitoring project as well as to create a new staff attorney at Law New York and to support our other stakeholders in this holistic response—really the rapid response it ended up being to COVID and the impact on housing.

So I'd like to turn it over now to Sateesh and ask a couple more questions about your introduction and your project. And I guess next I'd like to focus on, after more than a year into the pandemic, where do you feel you're at, what have you accomplished, and what are you most proud of?

Sateesh Nori:

Thank you so much, Michaela. It's great to have you back. I guess this is part of our zoom world now, so here we go.

Thank you for your question. In mid-March of 2020, my co-professor and I were midway through our Housing Rights Clinic at NYU. We had cases in Housing Court in Queens. We had 10 students who were paired up. We'd actually met our students in person, which was really great. And our students had clients, and they met their clients in person, which was also pretty neat.

Our students worked in a courthouse intake office. Some had appeared in court on motions, and so it was unfolding as a typical semester would. Our model had been to teach students about working as tenant attorneys in Queens Housing Court. Queens Housing Court is a place infected by institutional racism, bias against immigrants, and sexism. It's a place in which the mechanisms of the state-court-ordered warrants of eviction executed by city marshals permanently impacted communities of color.

Then, we hit reset, as many of us had to do. The pandemic took hold in Queens, which became an epicenter of illness and death. Our clients—restaurant workers, taxi and Uber drivers, home-health aides, single parents, immigrants, the elderly, the disabled—they were losing work, they were getting sick, and they were facing eviction and foreclosure. In the clinic, our work as we knew it stopped. Courthouses were closed to the public, legal aid was operating remotely, and our seminars at NYU would be on Zoom. And we thought, "What's Zoom?" And here we are today on Zoom. So we had to adapt. We had to think of what was essential to the work of the clinic and the work of legal aid and housing court.

We began rethinking the framework for the clinic, and we started with reaffirming a basic principle: First, housing is a human right. The pandemic forced us to go back to the root of the problem that we were trying to solve—that there is no right to housing here. We cobbled together a set of legal and procedural protections for tenants, which, under the perfect lens, resembles a right to housing. For example, we have NYCHA; we have rent regulation and rental assistance programs; and, in court, we have notice, we have service requirements, and we have other due process rules and the RPAPL. But none of this adds up to a right to housing.

Number two, we realized that housing and public health are linked, and we realized this for the first time, unfortunately, during the pandemic. Families who face eviction are more likely to get COVID. They live under higher levels of stress. Underlying and chronic conditions are worsened for low-income people.

And finally, it's about the clients. It's about the clients. It's about the clients—self-explanatory.

So we deployed our students under these principles. We focused on the human right to housing—the right to safe, healthy, and decent housing. We commenced HP actions, which are cases for repairs. We used JustFix. We fought landlords who were harassing their tenants by limiting services or threatening them. Our students did virtual trials and hearings. We prepped witnesses on Zoom and by phone. We gathered evidence by preparing subpoenas and filing them electronically.

We also had students staff a tenant-help hotline operated by the city, and we had them follow-up on inquiries from tenants sent to us by elected officials and community groups. Our students did community trainings on Zoom about eviction moratoria, rent assistance, and tenants' rights.

We also experimented with tech tools to bridge the digital divide faced by many of our clients; we learned exactly how deep and how wide the digital divide really is. One of our clients, for example, had never used a device with a screen before. Our students spent almost 10 hours on the phone teaching this person how to operate a tablet.

Quick plug—you can hear more about the Justice Tablet Project next Wednesday at this time at an event held by the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice. I'll put the link in the chat.

We also discussed the impacts of the pandemic on our clients—the most vulnerable. We linked the commonality of a public health crisis with the commonality of housing insecurity. We invited legal and public health scholars, like Emily Benfer who was mentioned earlier and reporters from the New York Times and other places, to our seminar to describe these links that we had never seen before, or that we'd never appreciated before. So the spring semester of 2020 ended, and we continued in this model for the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2021.

So what did we learn? Much of this we learned from our students. Number one, communicating with clients is key. Recognizing the inequities and imbalances in the system means communicating with our clients—it means conveying clear, accurate information, it means following up, and it means listening. The pandemic forced us to open new channels of communication—phone, Zoom, WhatsApp, iMessage, even snail mail. We need to keep all such channels open after the pandemic. We need to meet our clients where they are. We can't return to a model in which we force our clients to meet us where we are. Our turf, whether it's the courthouse or our offices, is part of the problem. They're part of the oppressive atmosphere. I love what Miranda said, which is that housing court or eviction court is itself a pandemic, and it's always been one.

Number two, relevant and timely work is critical. Our students are in fact people, just like all of us are, and we want to engage in the issues of the day. No lecture or PowerPoint can substitute for the time our students spent with their clients, and the format didn't matter. One of our students living in Western Canada successfully helped try a case virtually for our client in Queens. And this is a person who had been dragged out of his apartment by his landlord's son, beaten in front of the building, and then illegally evicted. We prepped the client, a Spanish speaker, on the phone, and he told his story to the judge. Now, my student and this client will probably never meet, but the effort was real. Our client trusted her and believed that we were fighting for him.

Third, the digital divide is a due process issue. As Richard Susskind says, "The courts are not a place, but a service." We need to recognize how this service is delivered and plan for a future in which courts are virtual, filings can be remote, and people don't need to interrupt their lives to fight for basic needs.

And thank you, I'll stop there.

Michaela Azemi: Thank you so much, Sateesh.

I want to open it up to all the panelists now to think about the fact that you said you learn so much about this work from your students

and the fact that no lecture can substitute for this work. What do you think, panelists, that law schools can do to further this work and serve to bridge the community and law student partnership?

Sharon Stapel: So I'm happy to speak to that a little bit based on our work with Hofstra Law School.

I'm really struck by two things: one, how many of the speakers earlier today had things to say that were so relevant to our panel and also how similar all of our work is in many ways, although it's different in really important ways as well.

And I'm struck by the conversation that we had this morning where both Dean Lester and Chief Judge DiFiore and Professor Rodriguez were talking about the role of law students and the need to be deeply human and to be able to empathize with the people most marginalized and lifting up communities and thinking about how law students can learn to listen to community members and provide people the tools they need to do the things that they already know they want to do.

And I think, by partnering with Hofstra Law School, we saw this in practice. When we first started, I think the students were very focused on the types of things that you might expect students to be focused on: the process and the substance of the law—on those things. And, over time, we were able to work with students to talk to them about how do you have a conversation with someone and how do you listen to the things that they're saying and the things that they're not saying.

And issue spotting is important, but so is relating to someone and being able to have that conversation. How do you search for a resource that is relevant, not just because it is on topic, but because it is responsive to what the visitor is asking you about? And then, how do you have that conversation? And, again, this is the overlap—and Sateesh was just speaking to this—but how do you have that conversation virtually in a way that has to be both low tech and no tech and high tech all at the same time?

And I think that one of the things that the pandemic has shown us—and I'd be so interested to hear also what Norrinda has to say because I think she spoke to this in the beginning in the answer to her question—the pandemic has, in many ways, opened possibilities and dropped barriers, necessarily. The barriers couldn't hold anymore. And, hopefully, some of those barriers that have been dropped are about our roles and what our identity is as a law student or a community member or an organizer or a lawyer. And having this experience that all of us were unfamiliar with but had to navigate together allowed us to live in multiple roles at the same time and interact with people in different roles. And, if the law students got out of the experience what we saw them learn and if that really resonated to them, I think that makes you a different lawyer when all is said and done.

Michaela Azemi: I appreciate that description of the fluidity that we each hold in our different roles. I'm also struck by Sateesh and Norrinda both talking about social media and technology and law students really being on the forefront of that.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about utilizing social media to connect with community members where they're located.

Sateesh Nori: Well, what I would add here is that we don't realize that our clients don't see the walls that we put up between us. They don't see the difference between Legal Hand and a law school and a legal services provider and an elected official's office. Those are walls that we put up to separate. Our clients just have a legal problem. And I think one of the great things about a clinic is that we can overcome these walls. We swim in multiple pools (other analogies insert here). We can do that. And so that's been the most rewarding thing about this past year. I'm a legal aid lawyer, but I also work at a law school, and I'm also involved in these other groups that do this type of work. And we can use all the resources we have.

And our students can do that and help solve problems. And I think the contrary view is that we're all separated. We're in our lanes, and we can't interact. There are certain things we should do and we shouldn't do, so we need to look beyond that going forward.



Michaela Azemi: Norrinda you had a thought too.

Norrinda Hayat: Yeah, I'll add just briefly two thoughts. We have been working on a transparency project in the clinic, and I had gotten grant funding to try to shake loose eviction court records. Because, again, think about that, systematically, in Essex County, which files the largest number of evictions in New Jersey, they were not digitizing the records. So no one really had good information on these documents and who was being evicted for what and for how much. A simple question that was posed to us by the Mayor's Office back in 2018 is: What's the average amount owed by a tenant? I could not answer because of this issue with transparency at the courthouse.

And that kept us from trying to get into solving some of these problems. So we've been on a year's crusade to get these records. But the pandemic—because the court was closed and there's an obligation to provide access—really pushed Essex's hand to uploading these records that we wanted. And now there's this new system where all of the landlord-tenant eviction files are digitized or are in the process of being digitized. And it's going to create access to justice in many deep weeds because we can analyze the data. So I think, again, this is a place where the pandemic has helped shake loose some issues that were already there, and this is good.

I don't want to be Pollyanna about this though. We've tried to take depositions in other cases remotely, and it has just been a crap shoot—I just think they are still. And so good for the students to see—for us to see—that there are benefits to technology and innovation and then there are, at least for the time being, somethings that may be better off done the old-fashioned way.

And we had conversations about that. I would tell them when I first started taking depositions, video depositions weren't a thing at all, and then they became a thing, but a very expensive thing. And now Zoom creates access. So, again, there's this push and pull of technology that I just want to name—that it's been great in many respects, but we still have some ways to go in some other respects. And the students really had a front row seat to just thinking

through: Where can innovation really make a difference in a positive way? And where can technology make a difference in a positive way and change the landscape? And there are examples of those things. And then there's certain other things where I would push for them to meet their client in person, though they could do so in Zoom or over the phone or what have you. Even when we go back, I'm still going to argue to go see your client. So I think what we're in the middle of right now is just reevaluating our processes all around.

Michaela Azemi: It's a great lead into my next question for Sharon, which is: Where do we go from here? What are the next steps moving forward from the limitations that we have right now with this new age (as you said, Norrinda) to where we're headed?

Sharon Stapel: Yeah. And, again, I invite Sateesh and Norrinda to add in because I think we all have thoughts about where we go from here.

And you know I think we've learned a lot through the pandemic and, Norrinda, I really appreciate this sort of push-pull that you named because I think it is important to understand that it's not all of one thing or another. And I've been learning a lot today as well. This conference has been really interesting.

And I think one of the things that we've learned at Legal Hand (although it really was one of the principles that started Legal Hand, but, for me, it hasn't been reinforced during the pandemic) is that we were created by Helaine Barnett (who is the chair of the New York State Permanent Commission on Access to Justice) specifically because there was a lack of access to justice in marginalized communities. And that lack of access occurs well before people get to the formal legal system. And a lot of the speakers this morning spoke to that idea. I believe it was Professor Rodriguez who said that lack of access was not a question of people not having a voice; it was a question of people not being listened to.

And so I think one of the things that we at Legal Hand have tried to do is really center the needs of community members when we're thinking about how we're developing programming. And, when we pivoted during the pandemic and had to create something that was

completely online, one of our fears was that it would not be accessible to people. We really wanted to make sure that community members would be able to access what we were doing but also that the resources that we were providing were really relevant to community members.

In developing a whole new model of engaging with folks, it also gave us an opportunity to really work differently with our volunteers, or in more and better ways where volunteers could really speak to us about their lived experiences within the pandemic and before the pandemic and tell us what was useful to them in their communities. And that could start to form the basis of the resources that we would provide to folks.

I think it was Professor Archer who spoke to the broad, intertwined legal and social issues—that people's legal issues are not just legal issues, and their social issues are not just social issues. And we've seen all of that exacerbated by the pandemic. But, also, that the solution for those problems isn't always a courtroom. And sometimes I think if we look to how we can use the resources that are available before we get to the court process, that's really what Legal Hand has been striving to do.

There are some practical issues that we also learned about, as I mentioned in my intro, where we pivoted by engaging new and custom technology. We really needed to think through—are people going to call us? are they going to text us? will they use the chat function on their computer? do they have computers? will they email us? do they want to meet by video?—and really make as many channels available to as many people as possible. But that means training all of the volunteers and the law students to do that as well.

Norrinda was talking about how not all technology will solve all problems. You really do have to be careful about whether or not technology is a solution to a particular problem, or whether the old-fashioned way does in fact work.

And then I also think we had this real opportunity, in part, because of the moratorium (perhaps with housing issues) and, in part,

because we were able to work with students who could really spend the time thinking about the clinic. I feel like the Hofstra students really had the opportunity to focus on having these conversations and seeing the social and the legal as connected, although not necessarily the same.

So, for example, one of our students was able to give one of our visitors really comprehensive information about the eviction moratorium and how to take action to protect her housing in the moment. And then, as a result, the visitor started talking to us about the discrimination that she was facing by her landlord. And so we were able to provide information about discrimination resources and also think about contingencies: What happens if you need to move (not because of nonpayment of rent but because it's not a tolerable place to live anymore)? What does searching for affordable housing look like? What does rental assistance to move look like?

Another student was working with a visitor whose subsidized housing was being threatened when her son died during the pandemic, and so we worked through those issues with her. But, as a result, we also talked to her about grief resources and what it means to be grieving someone at this particular time.

We learned it was possible for us to mobilize; it was possible for students to mobilize; it was possible for community members to mobilize virtually. And that human interaction is still the most important thing. But, again, as I mentioned, I think Norrinda, Sateesh, and you, Michaela, can really speak to this as well because we've all had very similar experiences.

Michaela Azemi: That's great. Other thoughts on what we've learned?

Sateesh Nori: I would just echo what Sharon and Norrinda said which is that we need to use all the tools that we have available. Technology is one of them, but we also need to use what's best for our clients and what's best for each situation.

And now we just have more tools. That's the way we should look at it going forward. But the goals aren't different, and the goals of our

clients and the problems they're facing are no different. In fact, many are worse.

So, yeah. That's all I would add.

Michaela Azemi: I'm thinking about a theme that we've all talked about which is this contrast between being siloed and connecting—using technology as tool to make that connection and then the idea of cultivating the next generation of housing advocates through that connection to community. I think we're all doing it in a little bit different ways, but I've already learned so much from each of you this session.

Sateesh Nori: I would add too that we are all more connected now. That's better for our clients. So I think we should take that away with us too. I'm more connected to the partners at other legal services organizations, people and other offices at Legal Aid, and other units. So I think that's been a positive of this terrible year.

Michaela Azemi: From my perspective handling the externship program at the law school, I'm thinking about the wide array of possibilities of sending students remotely all over the country to do this work in ways that they couldn't otherwise without technology.

We do have a question in the chat, but I don't know, Norrinda, if you had a sort of lessons learned or thought on that before we move on.

Norrinda Hayat: No. I think we should definitely move on to the chat.

Michaela Azemi: Okay. First question is: How can we as lawyers fight for increasing the amount of affordable housing available? And I think the comment that goes along with it is that anti-racism work requires affordable housing, as Professor Archer said earlier.

Sateesh Nori: I think that's a great question from Charles my intern. Thanks Charles.

What I would say is that part of it is highlighting what's happening and telling our clients' stories (with their permission) and explaining that we're fighting over a dwindling piece of the pie. And that's only

one part of it. We can't just prevent harm. We need to help people not just prevent harm. And that's really what housing court, unfortunately, has become. It's just having the least bad outcome for a client. It's telling the story of housing court and explaining this is a kind of losing proposition once you enter the doors of housing court as a litigant—as a tenant—you're already going to walk away with less than you had before you got here. So, if we can tell that story, then we can get policymakers and others to push for affordable housing. That's my two cents.

Norrinda Hayat: I'd just add that we move away from a scarcity narrative. So even as we think about the subsidized voucher program (which I spend a lot of time thinking about and researching on), it is providing housing for a fraction of the people that qualify for its benefits. Why is that so? There's just no need for there to be this artificial cutoff for the number of people that can actually take advantage of this needed program. It fuels the eviction crisis.

And one thing that the Biden administration has acknowledged, and Secretary Fudge has acknowledged is that if there were more subsidies, then we wouldn't have been so worried about an eviction moratorium. Because of the way the voucher program works, if these folks' incomes dropped or their ability to make income lowered, their subsidy would have increased because it's 30% based on the amount of money that you're bringing in. And if everything was functioning in an inappropriate way—I mean, I have some issues with how long it takes to recertify and calculate, but let's just put those aside and do really back of the envelope math here—people's incomes would have changed and their housing subsidy could have risen to match what they were making. And there are thousands and thousands of people who are at risk of being evicted during the pandemic that would not have been evicted. So we have to go back to why those people aren't being subsidized by their government in the first place when we know that they need it.

We had an 11 years' wait in LA. When Newark opened up two years ago for the housing and opened its waitlist for vouchers, there was a lottery. You had to get in a lottery to get on the waitlist to wait longer—for years! So there was a lottery for the waitlist. That's it. And it was done on computer at a time when people weren't

actually tech savvy. So we were bringing people into the office to help them with the computer, and you had to try to explain to them that this is only getting you into the lottery to maybe get your number called to get on the waitlist to wait some more time. That's ludicrous! And so, I think there's so much policy work to be done here.

Sateesh, you mentioned earlier that housing is a human right. We need to make that a reality in this country. And I'll just quickly say that there's a very deep connection between the incarcerated state and what we're doing in housing and family law—how we are separating families. So, again, subsidized housing prevents recently decarcerated persons from living in the housing with their families, which interrupts family reunification. And it also puts more people on the street.

And we know that so many of these folks—black and brown—have been swept up in this prison industrial complex. To then say that they can't be housed when they come out is just inhumane of us. And so we need to tap into our own humanity and stop creating a narrative of scarcity surrounding housing, which is just the most basic thing we could provide our citizens.

Michaela Azemi: That's powerful and true. I appreciate that move away from a scarcity narrative and also thinking about policy as a focus and how our students can be involved in every stage of this—from legal information, brief advice, full scope, and policy advocacy along that spectrum.

There is a question that Mary put in the chat. Really, I think, her question is: Do we see the work that we're all doing carrying forward in our students and creating this pipeline of future housing advocates? Is that on the horizon?

I would venture to say, "I hope so."

Sateesh Nori: Yes, yes! I would just add. I know we're almost out of time, or we are at a time, but yes.

We've placed a number of students in legal services organizations, and I think the students are taking away with them after this year a really broad picture of what housing justice looks like. And I didn't have that when I started, and I think that's a real strength. So I think this next generation is going to do really great things with this experience.

It'll be unforgettable for all of us but particularly for these students. They're going to think broadly. They're going to be creative. They're going to think about dismantling structures, like housing court and the eviction process, and, as Norrinda said, draw real links between many of the oppressive systems that we face and that our clients face.

Michaela Azemi: I agree. And I see, at least at Cornell, the implementation of this tenant advocacy practicum and this energy that I didn't see in the past few years around housing. And it makes me excited to think about the future generation.

I think there's another question from Mary: Do you see tenant organizing movements lacking or will it revive? And has it grown stronger?

Sateesh Nori: Yeah. Oh sorry, go ahead, Sharon.

Sharon Stapel: So I'll be quick, Sateesh, because I'm sure you have a lot to contribute to this.

From the Legal Hand perspective, we also work with community volunteers who are the leading voices in the information that we give out to people. And many of them are themselves tenant advocates. And what I'm really struck by from conversations with our volunteers is that they are as committed to housing equity and equality as they were prior to the pandemic (and possibly more given what's at risk now). But also, they are aware that, when there is political will, we can, in fact, pay everyone's rent for a year. And this goes to Norrinda's comment about the scarcity mentality. It's not that we can't; it's that we don't.



And so I think that not only are our volunteers as committed to the tenant-advocacy work that they've been doing (and they're certainly giving us lots of information about the things that they're involved with), but also we are at a moment where the possibility is no longer theoretical. It's actually starting to happen. And the question is: Do we leverage this as an organizing strategy or do we see it as a one-time thing? And I think that's what folks are talking about, at least with our volunteers.

Sateesh Nori: Yeah. I would just add that I think we pulled back the curtain a little bit this year. So many more people realize what happens in housing court, what happens to people who are under-housed or face housing insecurity, what that means from a public health perspective, and what that means for our cities and our communities bouncing back from COVID. So I hope that the tenant-rights movement will grow stronger, because now we see more of a problem, not just a piece of it.

Michaela Azemi: Thank you so much. And you'll see our contact information on the slide here.

We didn't get a chance to answer all the questions in the chat. We always run out of time. There's so much to talk about in this topic. But please feel free to reach out to all of us. And we will post an FAQ afterward to answer any lingering questions. So thank you so much.