

Regional Housing Legal Services & Pennsylvania Utility Law Project Racial Equity Progress & Accountability Report January 2021 – September 2021

In June of 2020, Regional Housing Legal Services (RHLS) and the Pennsylvania Utility Law Project (PULP) responded to the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN)'s Call to Action on Systemic Racism with a commitment to proactively address racism. The following report aims to fulfill the commitments outlined in that statement in the interest of transparency and honesty with our clients, partners, funders, and friends.

Racial Justice Priority One:

Outreach, Engagement, Listening, and Learning

- The Pennsylvania Utility Law Project (PULP) presented at the 2021 PA Community Alliance Summit, focusing on COVID's impact on energy insecure BIPOC and low-income households.
- PULP hired a full-time, bi-lingual project manager with legal experience to lead a new Utility Justice Project, focused on capacity building, resource development, and outreach to Black and Latinx populations in the Northeastern region – with a specific focus on rural areas.
- RHLS and PULP engaged in a reading and discussion from “The Racial Healing Handbook” for our staff meeting.
- Both RHLS and PULP continue to share relevant content on social media pages to support greater awareness of the intersections of housing and utilities with issues of racial equity.
- Both RHLS and PULP are ensuring that community outreach materials such as infographics and flyers are available in Spanish language versions.

Racial Justice Priority Two:

Transparency & Accountability in Housing and Utility Policy

- RHLS prepared a [policy brief](#) analyzing Pennsylvania's Emergency Rental Assistance Programs during COVID-19, providing recommendations focused on promoting equity in the distribution of funds.
- In partnership with Community Legal Services and the University of Pennsylvania, PULP co-sponsored and consulted on [a major research paper](#) which studied the racial disparities in COVID infection rates, death rates, and community impact across the Commonwealth – with an emphasis on impacts to utility access and stability.
- PULP hosted a webinar for the PLAN Utility Law Group and other stakeholders focused on litigation strategies to address discriminatory lease practices, with special guest speaker from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.
- PULP provided comments to the Diversity Rulemaking proceeding for the Public Utility Commission (July), arguing for improved data and reporting and more equitable and inclusive definitional language.
- PULP co-wrote and signed on to “[Essential Utility Services During COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: A Roadmap to Utility Service as a Human Right](#),” recommending that, “utilities report on the disparities in impacts by race and ethnicity on billing, collection, and termination practice, and all services provided, and correct any identified disparities.”

Racial Justice Priority Three:
Resources & Internal Programs

- RHLS and PULP staff created three sub-committees to support specific areas of action for the organization to address: external work; hiring practices, human resources, and internal policies; and education/training. The committees have begun “deep dives” into more granular organizational issues to set priorities for advancing racial justice within the organization.
- RHLS redesigned the demographics survey provided to Board and Staff to capture more identities and allow for more inclusive and in-depth demographic information to be provided for funders.
- As part of the work of the hiring practices committee, RHLS and PULP created a new policy for hiring practices and principles that support transparency at all stages of the hiring process, outreach beyond existing organizational networks, measures to combat bias, and consistency and standardization in assessing candidates’ skills and abilities.