Organization
Columbia Legal Services

Project Title
The Cost of Justice Through Systemic Legal Advocacy

Organizational Background
For many years, Columbia Legal Services has represented communities facing poverty and oppression, and we use every legal tool available on their behalf. We share a deep commitment to serve and advocate alongside our clients as we seek justice together. Through community-led movement lawyering and a systemic approach, we are supporting communities and movements by bringing deep legal expertise that is grounded in – and strongly guided by – an understanding of race equity.

We are part of the Alliance for Equal Justice (Alliance) (http://allianceforequaljustice.org/). The Alliance works together to ensure that all people living in poverty in WA have access to legal services. The WA state and federal government provide funding for legal services for low income people. However, those funds cannot be used to serve people who do not have U.S. immigration status or who are incarcerated. Additionally, these government funds cannot be used for class action litigation or for policy advocacy. Our role in the Alliance is twofold (1) we serve the communities that are left out of state and federal government legal aid funding and (2) conduct class action litigation and policy advocacy so that low-income people in WA have access to all available legal tools when seeking justice.

MISSION
Columbia Legal Services advocates for laws that advance social, economic, and racial equity for people living in poverty.

VISION
A Washington State in which every person enjoys full human rights and economic opportunities.

VALUES
Community. Our work is directed by the communities we serve. We contribute our legal knowledge and skills to support initiatives that are identified by the community to enhance the community’s power.

Race Equity. We hold ourselves accountable to principles of race equity and human rights. Through our community-led legal advocacy, we hold government agencies, institutions, and other actors accountable to address the root causes of racism and their manifestation in unfair treatment and inequitable access to resources, power, and opportunities based on race.
Justice. We believe that to achieve justice, all communities should have a voice in the creation and implementation of the policies, laws, and legal systems that impact them. We believe that our legal system must be held accountable by the people most impacted by it.

Project Description
This project has two parts. First, we want to work with students to create a metric that helps us explain our current impact. This project would help us communicate to potential funders the ways in which our class action litigation and policy advocacy impacts the lives of people in Washington, creates a more just society, and stops injustices. Second, we want to quantify the gap between the need for our services and our current capacity to meet that need. Once we understand the gap we want to assess the amount of financial support required to fully meet the need.

Travel Required?
No

Deliverables
The deliverable would include a report that sets out (1) the relevant demographics in WA; (2) the challenges facing the communities we serve; and (3) a summary of our systemic impact over the last 2-3 years. It would also include an analysis of where the shortfalls are in our capacity and what it would take to meet the need. The audience for this report would be the CLS board, potential funders, individual donors, and our Alliance partners. We would also like to develop a one pager that sets out this information in graphic form to quickly communicate the key take-aways from the report to these audiences. We would also ask the consultants to conduct a presentation on the information to our full CLS board or the board subcommittee.

Key Tasks for Consultants
The consultants would review our strategic planning documents, budgets, recent grant applications, and media articles about our work to understand our organization and the advocacy we undertake. Next, the consultants could conduct interviews with our staff to further develop a sense of our impact. We would provide the consultants with a list of our cases and legislative projects that has rough estimates about our impact. The consultants might also review documents about our role in the Alliance, including the State Plan for the Delivery of Legal Services for creating a civil legal aid delivery system.

The consultants would also review literature related to “minimum access” to legal services, which is a metric used to measure what number of attorneys are needed to provide individual representation to
low-income people. This data around individual case work could be helpful in understanding a possible metric for large scale legal advocacy, and is already widely circulated among the Alliance.