



## **Our Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion**

Vermont Legal Aid believes that everyone in Vermont should have equal access to legal services regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, national origin, sex, gender identity, sexuality, ability, mental health, income status, age, or education.

We are committed to being accessible and welcoming and we pledge that all community members will be treated with respect and courtesy. We recognize the additional challenges experienced by those who are unfamiliar with the legal system or have limited English proficiency and will strive to work with them as partners to address their legal needs and the causes of poverty, discrimination, and inequality.

We believe it is the responsibility of legal services organizations to help ensure that people who historically have been excluded from fully participating in the United States' legal system have the same access to legal services as the most privileged in our society.

We believe that diversity produces a more dynamic, creative, and thoughtful community. Accordingly, Vermont Legal Aid supports diversity of thought, culture and life experience among our staff and our community.

Further, Vermont Legal Aid seeks to leverage the diversity of our community to create an inclusive environment where members of the staff and our client community feel supported, listened to and encouraged to succeed. We seek to continually develop and nurture cultural competency as an organizational asset so that we may harness all of the community's strengths and foster inclusivity.

Our commitment to cultural competency requires a practice of sincere inquiry and learning about the differences and similarities in our community, and the ability to incorporate that learning into skills we apply in our work and our relationships. As a leader in the Vermont legal community, Vermont Legal Aid will be a catalyst for change by embracing diversity and promoting inclusion to ensure equity for all people. We are committed, through our practices and policies, to fostering cultural competence, inclusiveness, understanding, acceptance and respect in order to more effectively fight poverty, discrimination, and inequality.

## **We All Belong**

In 2013, Vermont Legal Aid, in a sustained effort to increase diversity and equality in our organization and our community, joined other local nonprofits and programs in a venture called *We All Belong*, part of Burlington's Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO). Through the *We All Belong* program, Vermont Legal Aid received staff training in diversity and cultural competency, and a full time AmeriCorps State service member to assist the staff in putting their training into action. Vermont Legal Aid remains committed to ongoing learning and development in cultural competency.

The *We All Belong* program has empowered Vermont Legal Aid to adopt more effective policies designed to help ensure that our services equitably reach communities that historically have been excluded from fully participating in the legal system.

Vermont Legal Aid has undertaken a series of initiatives as a result of the *We All Belong* program including:

- Creating and sharing information about local refugee populations and communities of color in Burlington;
- A two-day Staff College training program devoted to teaching all staff the *We All Belong* curriculum and the basics of diversity and cultural competency;
- A program of attorney-led informational outreach workshops at community organizations, particularly targeting outreach to communities of color in Burlington;
- A multi-language telephone tree, to make services by telephone more accessible to people with limited English proficiency;
- A regular series of inter-office educational e-mails on topics of race and white privilege;
- An improved hiring policy, to encourage a more inclusive hiring process for potential applicants