

Merf Ehman

Professional Summary

Experienced leader and legal advocate in civil rights litigation, systemic policy reform, and organizational transformation through an anti-racist and economic justice framework.

Education

JD State University of New York at Buffalo School of Law, Buffalo, New York, 1997. Certificate in Affordable Housing and Community Development

Dale S. Margulis Award for contributions to the law school and community

[SUNY Buffalo Lavender Gavel Award for GLBTQ+ community advocacy](#)

Law Faculty Award

Public Interest Law Fellowship, Women in Black, Belgrade Serbia

BA Nazareth University, Rochester, New York, 1990. Philosophy major, concentration in Women's Studies

Academic Interests

Housing Law and Policy with a focus on disparate impact

Criminal Legal System Reform

Racial Equity in Legal Practice

Civil Rights and Social Justice Lawyering including community and movement lawyering

Professional Experience

Columbia Legal Services, Seattle, WA

Executive Director (2017 - 2025)

- Provided inspirational leadership to a fifty-person statewide legal aid organization that advocates for laws that advance social, economic, and racial equity for people living in poverty.
- Provided structural support for complex litigation and policy advocacy to end the system of mass incarceration and promote immigrant equity and be accountable to the communities we serve.
- Led internal change movement to focus on racial justice, community lawyering, and systemic advocacy.
- Partnered with national legal aid organizations from across the country on institutional change movements, equity, and racial justice advocacy.
- Fostered current and future leaders.
- Developed restorative justice model for addressing internal conflict.
- Supported Union relationships and led collective bargaining.

- Implemented decision-making model to move towards more effective, efficient, and equitable decision making across the organization including holding open management meetings.
- Fundraised and developed meaningful relationships with funders and donors.
- Coordinated and supported finance, development, HR, and advocacy.

Staff Attorney and Managing Attorney (2008 - 2017)

- Drove advocacy strategies toward long-term social justice goals using legislative lobbying, litigation, storytelling, institutional relationship building and academic research.
- Litigated in the areas of civil rights, affordable housing, fair housing, disability rights, and prisoner rights. Represented individual and group clients in reentry clinic, housing, and prison reform cases.
- Advocated at the local, state, and federal levels for tenant rights, fair housing and reentry policy changes.
- Partnered with academic experts in reform efforts utilizing their research and expertise in litigation and policy advocacy.
- Partnered in successful internal effort to bring a race equity focus to CLS advocacy work and help developed race equity toolkit.
- Managed work of nine attorneys and four support staff practicing in diverse areas including elder law, youth advocacy, housing, transactional community advocacy, and consumer rights. Mentored and developed new attorneys.
- Created and implemented dynamic professional development plans for attorneys and support staff to reach their full potential.
- Implemented inclusion, diversity and multicultural program goals through facilitated discussions and trainings.

Impact Litigation Highlights

McCullum et al v. Vancouver Housing Authority

Represented Vancouver Housing Authority tenants for almost seven years in class action lawsuit to recover overpaid rent and reform unlawful practices related to utility payments. Obtained attorney fees and \$500,000 settlement for class members as well as non-monetary relief including regular reviews of setting utility rates and tenant involvement.

Haldane v. Hammon

Lead attorney in civil rights class action lawsuit against the state Department of Corrections to obtain medical care for thousands of prisoners suffering from inadequate medical care.

Wilson v. Seattle Housing Authority

Successfully settled federal housing class action lawsuit against Seattle Housing Authority involving due process and fair housing rights of 8,000 Section 8 Voucher holders. Reformed the way the housing authority handled terminations for people with

disabilities, changed policy to permit related adults to reside together and removed barriers so that children can live with non-parental caregivers. Changed definition of disability. Represented clients in new hearings to reinstate their vouchers.

Margola v. Seattle

Represented organizational client in class action settlement negotiations related to substandard housing issues. Worked with the City, landlord and tenant groups to craft an amended settlement agreement to use money to address substandard housing, create a model lease, repair policy and related documents for tenants and landlords translated into 13 languages; established a website that lists housing opportunities for low income people with real time vacancy.

Housing Policy Work

Represented individual and organizational clients in efforts to increase access to safe and affordable housing for everyone. Provided technical expertise on state bills addressing tenant screening, housing inspections, protections for domestic violence survivors, evictions and carbon monoxide monitors. Worked closely with tenant advocates and landlords in multi-year effort to significantly reform Residential Landlord Tenant Act.

Source of Income Ordinance, amending the Seattle Open Housing Ordinance

Co-lead effort to eliminate all types of discrimination based on a person's source of income and worked on *First in Time* legislation to begin to address unconscious racial bias in housing. Advocated with City to defend landlord's legal challenge to the law.

Stepping Forward

Provided legal expertise in community campaign that successfully stopped a housing authority from drastically changing its rent calculation policies that would have dramatically increased a tenant's rent burden and disproportionately impacted families and people of color. Lobbied at the local and federal level.

Rental Registration and Inspection Ordinance, passed 2012

Represented clients in long term effort (2008-2012) to create a Seattle rental housing inspection program to protect tenants from substandard housing by registering and inspecting rental units.

Criminal Legal System Policy Work

Leader in multi-year local, state and federal effort to create systemic criminal justice change by creating pathways to housing and employment for people with a criminal record.

Seattle Fair and Accessible Renting for Everyone

Led long term advocacy with a community and civil rights coalition to pass progressive and innovative bill banning the use of criminal records in housing application process and defended bill from legal challenges. Advocated for *First in Time* (FIT) legislation as part of this work to address unconscious bias in landlord decision making. FIT was found constitutional by WA State Supreme Court.

Jobs Assistance Ordinance

Directed effort to pass Seattle ordinance to increase employment opportunities for people with criminal records.

Seattle Re-Entry Resolution and Housing and Reentry Resolution

Worked to pass Seattle resolutions to improve tenant screening practices for people with criminal histories and create a community-based work group to recommend best policies and practices to eliminate the negative impacts of mass incarceration on local communities.

General Rule 15

Lobbied WA Supreme Court through administrative advocacy to block proposed amendments to GR 15 that would have made it more difficult to vacate or seal criminal records.

Certificates of Restoration of Opportunity Act

Reformed state occupational licensing system that allowed government agencies to deny applicants a license based solely on their criminal record through intensive coalition building.

King County Bar Association, Seattle, WA

Managing Attorney (2000 - 2008)

- Directed the Housing Justice Project, a court based pro bono eviction prevention program. Successfully helped replicate the Project in five Washington counties and several states. Supervised staff, managed budget, and created program materials.
- Recruited, trained and mentored volunteer attorneys and law students to represent low-income clients in eviction cases.
- Provided same day direct representation to tenants at unlawful detainer hearings.
- Conducted trials and revision hearings.
- Supervised Rule 9 students in all aspects of preparing for and representing clients in eviction hearings.
- Supported pro bono coordinators to spot legal issues, refer clients to volunteer attorneys, or refer for other needed assistance.
- Created collaborative partnerships with community organizations, government agencies, corporate counsel and law firms to address the emerging civil legal needs of

low-income clients with issues involving predatory lending, consumer law, HIV, public benefits, and re-entry.

Monroe County Legal Assistance, Rochester, NY
AmeriCorps Attorney (1998 - 1999)

- Represented clients in landlord/tenant and public benefits matters including administrative hearings, trials, and appeals. Performed community outreach and education.
- Developed coalitions and provided training to address issues involving the welfare to work, disability rights, and homelessness.

Selected Presentations

2025, 2024 University of Washington, Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, Operationalizing Equity, Guest Lecturer

2024 Power in Numbers: The National Movement to End Conviction Record Discrimination in Housing, Community Voices Heard, Panelist

2024 Human Rights and Race Equity, Seattle Rotary Club, Keynote

2023 Implementing Race Equity Toolkits, Michigan Advocacy Forum 2023, Presenter

2023 How to Make Decisions More Inclusive and Effective, Bridgespan Group, Presenter

2022-25 Management Information Exchange, New Executive Director Two Day Training, (Transforming Culture, Implementing Race Equity), Trainer

2022 The New ABA Standards for the Provision of Legal Aid, ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defense and Management Information Exchange, Panelist

2022 DEI and the Updated ABA Standards for the Provision of Civil Legal Aid, National Association of IOLTA Programs, Presenter

2022 Both Sides of the Bars, The Formerly Incarcerated Are Good Neighbors, Fortune Society Program, Panelist

2021 Massachusetts Legal Services Corporation, DEI Conference, Lunch Co-Speaker

2021 Disability in the Justice System: Increased Vulnerabilities During the Pandemic, WSBA CLE, Panelist

2021 The Elephant in the Room: The Evolving Role of Legal Aid in Addressing Systemic Racism, Panelist

2020-21 Let's Talk About (In)Justice: Speaker Series, Co-Chair, Speaker

2020 National Conference of Bar Examiners, Charting a New Course for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Panelist

2020 COVID-19 and the Compassionate Release of the Elderly, Infirm or High Risk, ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, Panelist

2020 Catalyst, PowerUP 2020 Funding Conference, Breakfast Speaker

2019 TEDx Talk, "What Gender Rules Do You Unconsciously Follow?," Speaker

2018 Race Matters: A Crash Course into Race and Lawyering, KCBA Pro Bono Programs, Presenter

2018 Washington Women's Foundation, Intersect Conference, Speaker

2017 Women's Prisons, Art, and Queerness, Panelist (2017)

2017 Access to Justice Conference, *Seeing in Color: Advocacy Through a Race Equity Lens*, Co-presenter

2016 Poverty Law Conference: Academic Activism

Together We Can: Advocates, Academics and Agencies Creating New Law, panelist

Growing a Legal Services Movement for Racial Justice, panelist

2015 Washington State Supreme Court Symposium on Reentry, *Barriers to Reentry in Housing, Employment and Education*, Presenter

2015 National Housing Law Conference (2015)

Utility Allowance Advocacy and Litigation, Panelist;

Housing and Criminal Records RoundTable, Panelist

2015 Access to Justice Conference

Cross-Difference Competence: A Necessary Component of Hearings and Trial Skills for the Legal Services and Pro Bono Attorneys, Panelist;

Help! I Need Somebody: Providing Culturally Competent Civil Legal Services to People Who Are or Were Incarcerated, Panelist

2015 International Law, Societies and Justice National Conference, *Community Advocacy and Criminal Justice*, Presenter

2012 Governing for Racial Equity Conference, *Two Case Studies: Seattle's Paid Sick and Safe Time and Job Assistance Legislation*, Panelist

2012 U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Civil Rights – *Effectively Working with Diverse Clients*, Presenter

2009, 2011 Seattle University School of Law, Poverty Law Class – *Disability, Legal Frameworks and Impediments to Justice*, Guest Speaker

2011 Washington State Bar Association - Keynote Speaker, Minority Law Student Welcome Reception

2001-2008 Landlord Tenant Law Annual CLE, Speaker

2009 Management Information Exchange, Supervising Legal Work Two-Day Training, Trainer and Workshop leader

Publications

2018 *The Long Road Home: Banning the Use of Criminal Records in Tenant Screening*, Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, Alex Bergstrom and Merf Ehman

2018 Management Information Exchange, Transforming Culture — *An Examination of Workplace Values Through the Frame of White Dominant Culture*

2015 Disparate Impact and Fair Housing Training Manual, National Housing Law Project

2015 *Tenant Screening in an Era of Mass Incarceration, A Criminal Record is No Crystal Ball*, NYU Journal of Law and Public Policy, Merf Ehman and Anna Reosti

2011 *The Elephant in the Room*, Washington State Bar News

2011 *Eviction Records and Discrimination*, Poverty Race and Research Council

Awards

2025 Access to Justice Leadership Award, Access to Justice Board

2016 Partners for Progress Award for Criminal Legal System Advocacy

2013 Resolution by Seattle Human Rights Commission recognizing leadership on Jobs Assistance Ordinance

- 2010** Best Tenant Watchdog, Seattle Weekly
- 2007** Washington Heroes in the Fight Award for work with clients who have mental health issues
- 2003** Washington Women Lawyers' Passing the Torch Award for mentoring excellence

PROFESSIONAL AND

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- 2021- 2025** WSBA Small Town and Rural Practice Council, member
- 2017-present** Management Information Exchange Journal Committee
- 2013-25** West Coast Poverty Center, University of Washington, Criminal Justice Roundtable, Co-chair
- 2017-2025** Access to Justice Board Delivery of Legal Services Committee (co-chair 2019-2021)
- 2019-24** Assistant Youth Soccer Coach, Beacon Hill Youth Soccer
- 2023** Karsh Center for Law and Democracy, UVA, Convening of Scholars and Advocates
- 2021-22** American Bar Association Civil Legal Aid Practice Standards Update, Drafter, Diversity Subcommittee Member
- 2018-2020** Housing Justice Project, Volunteer Attorney
- 2017-18** King County Regional Affordable Housing Taskforce, Standing Advisory Panel Member
- 2016** National Housing and Criminal Records Convening, Washington, D.C.
- 2014-15** Mayor's Housing Affordability and Livability Committee, Member
- 2015** Shriver Center Racial Justice Institute, participant (2015), application committee member (2021)
- 2002-06** King County Municipal League Candidate Evaluation Committee, member (Committee Chair 2003, 2006)
- 2003-04** Unemployment Law Project, Volunteer Attorney
- 2004-09** Three Dollar Bill Cinema, Board Member. Organize Seattle's Gay and Lesbian Film Festival
- 2002-04** Washington Women Lawyers of King County, Board Member, Vice President of Legislative Affairs and Glass Ceiling Task Force Liaison

Media

- 2024** Balancing Grace with Accountability in the Civil Legal Aid/Nonprofit Space, All Things Grace, Dr. Michelle Majors, Interviewee
- 2023** A Mountain to Climb: The Inaccessibility of Rural Courts, Jack Karp, December 1, 2023, Law360

2020 How One Organization Brought Discipline, Inclusivity, and Transparency to Its Decision Making Process, Bridgespan Journal (2020)

2018 Ruling against Seattle law hurts renters, advocates say, Seattle Times, Daniel Beekman

2017 Op-Ed: Innovative “First in Time” Law Sets Out a Fair Rental Application Process for Everyone, South Seattle Emerald, coauthor (2017)

2015 *America Behind Bars: Mass Incarceration and Civil Rights*, Humanities Washington and KUOW, panelist

2015 Seattle Group Pushes to Restrict Criminal Background Checks for Housing, KUOW

2006-08, 2011, 2016 KUOW, Landlord/Tenant Law - Radio Talk Show Guest