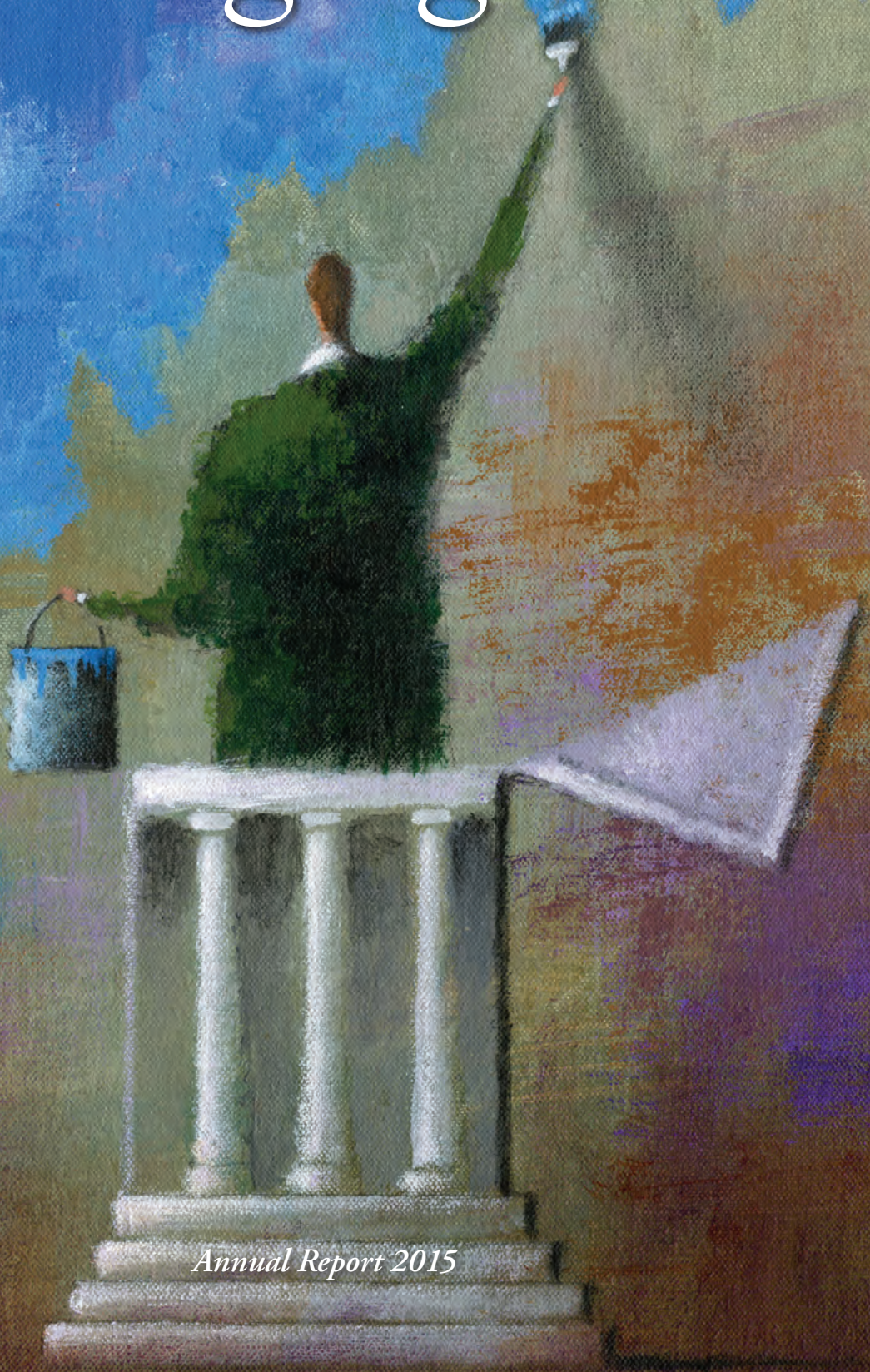


Volunteer Lawyers
for Justice

Taking cases. Changing lives.



Annual Report 2015

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In 2014...

5,334 
hours of legal services were donated by
VLJ volunteers

\$1,797,466
worth of free legal services were
donated by VLJ volunteer attorneys



3,460 
people were assisted by VLJ programs

Dear Friends:

We are proud to share with you VLJ's first annual report. For 14 years, VLJ has provided counsel and advice, community education, legal services and advocacy for change to and for New Jersey's most vulnerable populations. We've been busy doing our work, along with the support of our outstanding funders, community partners and thousands of attorney volunteers, but it's time to reflect on the difference we are making in the lives of New Jersey's disadvantaged populations.

Since providing legal aid to victims of the World Trade Center attack in 2001, our founding year, VLJ has become known for quickly responding to emergent needs for legal services through innovative programming. Eleven years after 9/11, VLJ and our volunteers were providing legal services to victims of Superstorm Sandy within days of its ravaging the coastline. With emergency funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Robin Hood Foundation, the Hurricane Sandy New Jersey Relief Fund, the Merck Company Foundation and McCarter & English, LLP, VLJ launched free legal clinics in areas most impacted by the storm and created virtual clinics to connect attorneys with victims in remote counties. VLJ has launched project after project to meet the legal needs of underserved consumers, veterans, ex-offenders, students with special needs, victims of human trafficking and more, helping tens of thousands of clients along the way.

Today, VLJ is an independent pro bono organization providing free legal assistance to residents throughout the state; technical help to firms and corporations seeking to create pro bono programs; and leadership to New Jersey's legal services community. In 2014, VLJ served a record number of clients and added staff to meet the growing need for services. We are enormously grateful to our individual, foundation, firm and corporate funders for allowing us to assist underserved individuals whose legal needs would otherwise go unmet.

On the following pages you'll read about the work we are doing with the generous help of our supporters and partners. We are very proud of what we have accomplished, but there is still much to do. The staff and board of VLJ are up to the challenge and we continue to abide by the words of William James: "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does." Thank you for your support.



Karen Sacks, Esq.



Susan A. Feeney, Esq.

Karen Sacks

Karen Sacks, Esq.
Founder and Executive Director

Susan A. Feeney

Susan A. Feeney, Esq.
Chair, Board of Trustees

Aiding Women, Children and Families

"Lawyers possess the keys to justice under the rule of law, the keys that open the courtroom door. Those keys... are held in trust for rich and poor alike. Nonetheless, a great and crying need for legal services for the poor remains."

—FORMER SUPREME COURT JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR

Legal Aid for Trafficking Victims

Sex trafficking victims are coerced into prostitution against their will. Exploited and abused, they often end up with criminal records, making it impossible to obtain legitimate jobs, housing and education. These convictions remain with them throughout their lives.



M.S., center, with Geoffrey Rosamond of McCarter & English and VLJ managing attorney Jessica Kitson. Photo: Tim Darragh | NJ Advance Media

VLJ's Trafficking Victims Legal Assistance Program offers much-needed help to individuals who were trafficked and have nowhere else to turn. Attorneys work with trafficking victims to have their criminal convictions and arrests arising from trafficking vacated from their criminal records. Vacated, as opposed to expunged, means it is as if they were never charged. In June 2015, VLJ and New Jersey law firm McCarter & English, LLP achieved a milestone victory, winning the first-ever vacatur hearing for a victim of sex trafficking in New Jersey under the state's new anti-trafficking law. The woman, known by her initials, M.S., is the first person in the state to have a criminal conviction erased because she herself was a victim of sexual exploitation.

M.S.'s descent into prostitution followed a series of harrowing setbacks. Her father died when she was five. Abandoned by her mother at 15, she had a son a few years later. She drifted into a life of drugs and crime and her son went to live with his father. In 2002 M.S. became involved with a man who tricked her into believing he would help her get her son back. Instead, he trafficked her for sex, abused and beat her, and took her money. She was arrested several times, but her trafficker always bailed her out and forced her back to work.

M.S. finally escaped from her trafficker in 2004. She testified at his trial, helping to put him behind bars for 20 years. Relieved that he was off the streets, she nevertheless faced a huge obstacle on her path to a better life. Her convictions kept her from obtaining the job she needed for her very survival.

With legal services provided by attorneys Jessica Kitson of VLJ and Geoffrey Rosamond of McCarter & English, M.S.'s convictions were vacated. Her court case was the focus of a feature article in New Jersey's *Star-Ledger*. She's regained custody of her son and will be reimbursed for all the fees she paid throughout her convictions.

Taking cases.
Changing lives.

98% of low-income families needing help with children's education issues were matched with a volunteer attorney

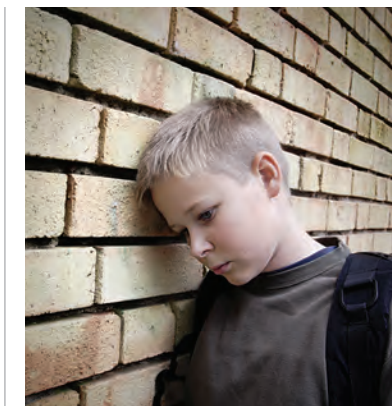
609 people received help with family law issues

12-14 is the average age girls enter the sex trade

Halting Bullying Through Litigation

The heartbreak of bullying strikes at the most vulnerable members of society. When a child is bullied at school, eight out of ten times no adult intervenes to help.

Such was the case of a special education student in New Jersey who was bullied mercilessly. The family called on VLJ, who placed the case with attorneys Mary Hartnett and Richard Cino. The legal team obtained the services of Michael Green, PhD, a specialist in youth, school, and family violence at Rutgers University's School of



Criminal Justice, who served as an expert witness. The attorneys eventually obtained a successful settlement on behalf of the child's

parents: the child and the bullies were assigned to different schools. Hartnett and Cino are married with children of their own. Hartnett's passion for special education law grew out of the childhood experiences of her sister, Liz, who has cerebral palsy. "When it comes to dealing with experts and others in a case, an association with VLJ adds a great measure of legitimacy to the representation," says Hartnett. "You're not just a lawyer; you're part of something bigger."

Working Through Financial Crisis

“Programs like VLJ’s clinic help address this crisis, as volunteer lawyers try to pave the way for debtors to recover financially. We commend the lawyers in this and other pro bono initiatives who offer their skill and help at a time of need. By doing so, they help bridge the justice gap that leaves many low-income residents in New Jersey without legal services.”

— NEW JERSEY CHIEF JUSTICE
STUART RABNER

As quoted in his unanimous opinion for the court in a case brought by VLJ to expand pro bono representation in bankruptcy matters

Bankruptcy Offers Some a New Start

There is a paradox in filing for personal bankruptcy. The individual who is filing needs legal assistance. Yet he or she is overwhelmed by debt and without the funds to pay household bills, let alone legal fees.

In a bankruptcy, so many questions need answers. Will it erase all debts? Provide a fresh financial start? Is the individual even eligible to file? The answers are not always obvious, and bankruptcy filing is a daunting task. The success rate for individuals handling bankruptcy without an attorney is low.

VLJ’s Bankruptcy Program, launched in 2001, provides representation to low-income debtors looking to file Chapter 7 bankruptcy petitions. VLJ pairs clients with private attorneys through our direct referral case list, the Hon. Morris Stern Bankruptcy Pro Bono Project at Rutgers School of Law–Newark, and the Bankruptcy in a Box program, a partnership between pharmaceutical company Merck and Co., Inc., law firm Lowenstein Sandler LLC, and VLJ.

While bankruptcy carries a stigma of irresponsibility, it’s not always the outcome of overspending. Credit card and consumer debt, overwhelming medical expenses, a costly divorce, unemployment, or an inability to keep up with student loans can drive well-meaning individuals into bankruptcy.

Clients who come to VLJ for help first attend a seminar. Eligible clients are paired with an attorney who provides representation from beginning to end. The Merck volunteers include attorneys, paralegals, and administrative specialists,

all from the company’s patent department. Lowenstein’s bankruptcy lawyers, who have deep expertise in this area, not only represent clients but also provide mentoring support to the Merck team.

Attorney Matthew Leff manages Merck’s participation and recruits volunteers. One case he handled was that of a woman who emigrated here from South America. Following a divorce, she eked out a living cleaning offices, struggling to survive on a small income. When she became ill and could not work, her bills piled up and she became beset by creditors. Distraught, she came to VLJ for help. Leff handled her bankruptcy filing and helped her deal with her creditors. She was approved for bankruptcy and was able to make a fresh start.

Says Mark Daniel, vice president and group managing counsel at Merck and a member of VLJ’s Board of Trustees: “As legal professionals, we’re using our skills to help people in need. But this work also helps the legal team hone important communication, team-building, and other skills. It’s a win-win.”



Expungement: A Route to Employment



U.S. Senator Cory Booker, a longtime VLJ collaborator since his tenure as mayor of Newark, was instrumental in launching VLJ’s Reentry Legal Services (ReLeSe) program. ReLeSe assists ex-offenders with a variety of legal

issues, ranging from expungement to drivers’ license suspension. The program’s goal is to help those with low-level offenses gain a second chance. It was only fitting that Senator Booker announced the re-introduction of his REDEEM (Record Expungement Designed to Enhance Employment) legislation at a clinic co-sponsored by VLJ and his office.

David Bershad (left), a member of VLJ’s Board of Trustees, is a longtime supporter of the ReLeSe program. “Re-entering society can be difficult for someone who’s just out of prison,” he observes. “ReLeSe helps ex-offenders over-

Taking cases.
Changing lives.

450
people with consumer law and bankruptcy issues sought VLJ’s help in 2014

474
people sought help through ReLeSe

99%
of ReLeSe clients remained conviction-free 16 months after receiving legal services from VLJ

come many obstacles preventing them from finding employment. This program makes a difference in peoples’ lives and I’m proud to support it.”

Under Booker’s proposed legislation, some offenses would be eligible for expungement relief. The legislation’s goal is to improve the employment rates of youthful offenders by offering an easier route to expungement.

A study of ReLeSe by the National Development and Research Institute concluded that ReLeSe clients recidivated less and were more gainfully employed post-ReLeSe services.

Advocating for Veterans

"The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation."

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

Setting the Record Straight

Veterans, including those who are honorably discharged, are entitled to a wide range of benefits, including health, education and housing benefits, amongst others. But when a discharge is unfavorable, or there are errors or omissions on discharge papers, veterans are denied benefits and face difficulty securing employment.

When 28-year-old A.R. was discharged from the U.S. Navy in 2008, he expected to return to his hometown and find work as a firefighter. He'd served in Kuwait and now wanted to serve his community. But he was barred from applying. His military discharge papers included an inaccurate diagnosis of personality disorder, and although he was honorably discharged, this negative assessment kept him from getting a job. "No one would hire me," he says. "Who'd want to hire someone with a personality disorder?" Desperate, broke, and even homeless for a time, A.R. learned about VLJ's Veterans Legal Program (VLP).

A.R.'s situation is shared by some 31,000 discharged service members who received an incorrect assessment of personality disorder between 2001 and 2010, according to a report issued by Yale Law School. Also, it is now recognized tens of thousands of veterans with undiagnosed

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) received other than honorable discharges for behaviors resulting from the PTSD, and were therefore denied the very benefits meant to treat the traumas of war.

VLP helps veterans who received other than honorable discharges, or have errors or omissions on their discharge papers, so they can receive full benefits to which they are entitled, and become



gainfully employed. Clients receive full representation by volunteer attorneys throughout the entire appeals process.

"I'm impressed by the compassion and professionalism of everyone at VLJ," says A.R. "They follow up and keep me informed. They've been very supportive and helpful." Since his discharge, A.R. has had several medical assessments that do not support the diagnosis of personality disorder. He's working through the process now with the assistance of a VLJ-assigned volunteer attorney.

VLJ staff and volunteers provide additional services to veterans, including help with legal problems ranging from suspended drivers' licenses and criminal records expungements to child support issues. VLJ has partnered with utility company PSEG and law firms Gibbons PC and McCarter & English, LLP to conduct monthly law clinics for veterans, and also holds seminars to train attorneys in the discharge upgrade legal process. Additional support for VLJ's veterans programs comes from the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey and Jewish Women's Foundation of New Jersey.

VLJ staff and volunteers will continue to work hard to help veterans re-acclimate to civilian life and get the benefits to which they are entitled.

Meeting the Needs of Women Veterans

Women are now the fastest-growing group of veterans. The stresses they face in the military are well-documented: from military sexual trauma and harassment, to the threat of combat and the struggle to gain acceptance in a male-dominated culture, to worries about spouses, children and families. Because of these stressors, many women veterans have tremendous difficulty re-entering civilian life. Among women veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, almost 20 percent have been diagnosed with PTSD.

As part of its service to veterans, VLJ, with a grant from the Jewish Women's Foundation of New Jersey, will conduct a legal needs assessment of New Jersey's women veterans to identify the unique legal issues they face upon return to civilian life. The outcomes will help VLJ create initiatives designed to assist women veterans with legal issues.



Taking cases.
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425,094
veterans live in NJ

32,968
of these veterans
are women

310
veterans helped by VLJ
since 2014

Responding to Disaster

“Years after the storm, Sandy victims were hit by something else they didn’t expect – the storm after the storm. Many people say they have been cheated out of their insurance claims. Thousands of claims have still not been resolved and there is evidence that many homeowners were victims of what appears to be wide-scale fraud.”

– 60 MINUTES, CBS NEWS

Helping Homeowners After A Storm’s Wrath

A couple worked and saved for years to buy a modest home in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, only to see it ravaged by Superstorm Sandy. Like many other devastated homeowners, they had no idea where to turn for assistance with legal issues arising from the storm.



Following the storm, VLJ’s volunteer and staff attorneys quickly mobilized to coordinate free walk-in legal clinics throughout the state through its Disaster Legal Response Program (DLRP). They set up a hotline, and worked hard to guide overwhelmed victims through the maze of government and insurance bureaucracy.

The Seaside Heights couple turned to VLJ not only for assistance in securing the funding that was wrongfully denied them, but also to help them stave off recoupment of a \$10,000 grant they’d already received and spent. Their claims had been denied because of their failure to prove the damaged home was their primary residence, a requirement to receive funding. This home was their primary residence and only asset, and with

both spouses out of work while one battled cancer, it was vitally important that the home be repaired.

VLJ staff attorney Jessica Limbacher worked tirelessly to provide documentation that ultimately proved the Seaside Heights home was the primary residence. The couple did not have to repay the \$10,000 they received and are eligible for other grants as well. They look forward to returning to their home once repairs are complete.

Three years post-Sandy, many New Jersey homeowners still face obstacles in the struggle to rebuild. By some estimates, less than fifteen percent of homeowners participating in the state’s largest grant program have rebuilt and moved back into their homes. And new legal needs have arisen as well. In 2014, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) sought recoupment of \$23 million in funds it says should have never been paid out to Sandy victims. While some perhaps received funds improperly, many are victims who need legal help legitimizing their claims after being re-victimized by the recoupment effort.

In March 2015, FEMA announced that homeowners who filed a National Flood Insurance Program claim after Sandy may request a review of the claim if the homeowner was not satisfied with the payout (if any). Thousands have applied to reopen their claims. VLJ also received dozens of calls from clients in the state land buy-out program, Blue Acres, seeking representation at real estate closings. Blue Acres gives homeowners the option to sell Sandy-damaged homes at pre-storm values in flood-prone areas. These homes will then be razed by the state, preserving the land to serve as a natural buffer against future storms and floods.

With the generous support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Hurricane Sandy New Jersey Relief Fund, the Robin Hood Foundation, the Merck Company Foundation, and McCarter & English, LLP, VLJ has and will continue to assist Superstorm Sandy victims to ensure they receive the benefits they need.



Taking cases.
Changing lives.

90,000

number of New Jersey homes destroyed by Superstorm Sandy



934

cases opened for Sandy victims through the DLRP

9,000

Sandy victims still unable to live in their primary homes



375

community organizations partner with VLJ to provide client services

Our Volunteer Partners

Those who can, do. Those who can do more, volunteer. Our attorney volunteers and corporate partners have given the gift of time, donating thousands of hours in 2014 to make a difference in the lives of the underserved in New Jersey. We express our deep gratitude to all those who work tirelessly to ensure that our clients receive the legal assistance they need.

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Through the generosity and involvement of our donors, VLJ has been able to provide free legal assistance to New Jersey residents in need, enabling them to secure fair treatment within the legal system. We thank our donors for their support and their belief in our mission.

\$200,000 AND OVER

Hurricane Sandy New Jersey Relief Fund
 Merck Company Foundation

\$100,000 - \$199,999

The Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey
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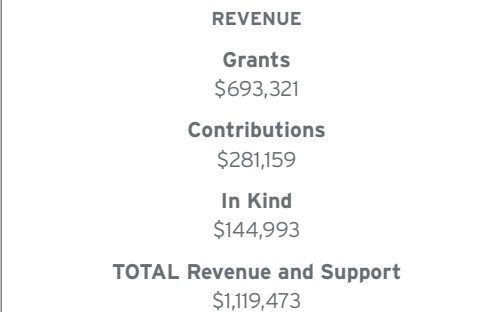
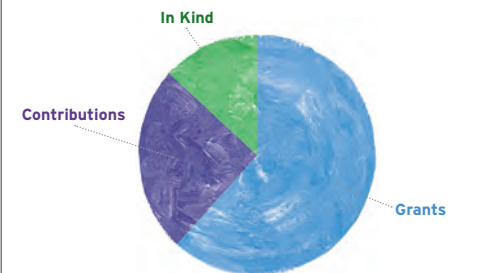
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While we carefully prepare our Donor and Volunteer Partners lists, we recognize that errors may have occurred. Please accept our apology if your name is not properly represented and contact Jane Newman Kessler at (973) 233-4292 or vlj@vljnj.org so that our records can be corrected. Thank you!

Volunteer Lawyers for Justice



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“...lawyers have a professional and moral duty to represent the underrepresented in our society, to ensure that justice exists for all, both legal and economic justice.”

—SUPREME COURT JUSTICE SONIA SOTOMAYOR

Annual Report 2015
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VLJ seeks to improve the lives of economically disadvantaged adults, children, and families in New Jersey by empowering them with tools, advice and pro bono representation with the goal of securing fair and equal treatment within the legal system.

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