

Racial Equity Progress & Accountability Report

January 2023 – July 2023

Regional Housing
Legal Services &
The Pennsylvania
Utility Law Project

Transparency & Accountability in Housing and Utility Policy

- RHLS has completed an updated to the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan, which seeks to deepen and expand work set forth in affordable housing, the intersections of health and housing, and racial equity. Most notably, the updated plan brings racial equity to the core of the organization's work plan moving forward, rather than a standalone priority.
- A partner organization contacted PULP about heads of immigrant households struggling to establish service with a utility company that was refusing to accept identification documents issued by a foreign government. PULP investigated the issue and identified that the company was in violation of a prior settlement agreement that required the company to accept foreign-issued documentation. PULP worked with the company to adopt and implement comprehensive revisions to their policies, training for customer service representatives, and assisted the company in developing a Spanish-language version of its denial-of-service letter with a comprehensive list of acceptable documents to help improve utility access for immigrant consumers.
- PULP won improved protections for immigrant households in a case against a large gas company. The company's identification policies and requirements to establish service were too restrictive and inequitably excluded immigrant households. The company agreed to start accepting foreign-issued identification documents and improved the ability for stakeholders to have an opportunity to review and make recommendations to remove further barriers to services.
- PULP led drafting efforts and submitted comments to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in response to the Agency's Request for Information about the new Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grant Program. The comments were co-drafted and co-signed by Pennsylvania environmental justice organizations.
- RHLS submitted comments to the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) urging them to do more to promote equity when granting funds from the PA Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund (PHARE).
- PULP submitted comments to the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority advocating for targeted funding of projects that would establish community broadband facilities within public and support housing settings, and that these facilities specifically provide additional resources for consumers with Limited English Proficiency so that consumers are able to learn about broadband resources in languages other than English.
- RHLS submitted comments to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to further improve the 2023 proposed Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) rule. These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the AFFH rule in promoting fair housing and addressing housing disparities.

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- PULP led efforts to establish an Environmental Justice Subcommittee within the LIHEAP Advisory Committee to the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) to examine the need for expanded cooling assistance and to identify and advance other policies to address the existence of urban heat islands and correspondingly higher energy burdens across low-income communities of color.
- With legal support from RHLS, Bethel AME Church has negotiated a historic agreement that provides a pathway to restorative justice in Pittsburgh's Lower Hill District. More than 60 years after the oldest Black congregation in Pittsburgh was displaced by a large, race-based urban renewal project, and its church taken and destroyed, Bethel AME fought for and won an opportunity to undertake a restorative development project near the location of its former church. The agreement gives Bethel-Trinity CDC, an affiliate of Bethel AME, development rights to 1.5 acres of land - an area that is more than 4 times larger than the original plot of land unjustly taken.
- RHLS worked with a coalition of neighborhood groups to come to an agreement with Shift Capital and the Wankawala Organization on a Community Benefits Agreement for the redevelopment of the Beury Building at Broad Street and Erie Avenue in Philadelphia. It includes commitments on hiring a certain percentage of women and people of color, as well as a jobs coordinator to help neighborhood residents apply for open positions. The agreement also includes a promise to provide general job training and apprenticeship initiatives, with the goal to increase the economic well-being of the entire area.

Outreach, Engagement, Listening, and Learning

- Dina Schlossberg testified before the Philadelphia City Council urging them to develop a coordinated and comprehensive strategy to preserve our existing subsidized affordable rental housing.
- Laura Edinger and Madi Keaton attended the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's Climate Action for Environmental Justice Communities Program community input meeting. They provided comments urging that the cost of climate mitigation efforts must not be borne by those most impacted by climate change and that solutions to address climate change must be advocated for and created by these same communities.
- Raina Mehta was a panelist for a CLE presented by the Allegheny County Bar Association entitled "Renewal and Gentrification in the Hill District (of Pittsburgh)."
- [RHLS and PULP released a joint statement on the murder of Jordan Neely in the New York City subway and the criminalization of homelessness.](#)

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- The DEI Education Subcommittee hosted a screening of "Crip Camp" in March and "Paris is Burning" in June.
- The DEI Education Subcommittee has continued to develop and distribute monthly emails containing holidays, DEI webinars, and other DEI resources to all staff.
- RHLS and PULP completed a three-part training series on disability - "Watch Your Mouth - What NOT to Say to a Disabled Person (And the Things You Can)," "Race & Disability," and "Beyond the Ramp: Fostering an Equitable Workplace Culture" - led by LaVant Consulting in May and June.

Resources & Internal Programs

- RHLS hired its first Outreach Specialist, Ifeoluwa Orebiyi, who will help brainstorm, design, and implement effective outreach strategies to ensure that community residents in selected locations are well-informed about housing-related programs, services, and opportunities – including information about governmental programs, RHLS' services, and the services of allied organizations.
- RHLS hired a PLAN Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellow, Esteban Rodriguez, to work in development legal services in the Philadelphia office.
- Over the past 18 months, the DEI Internal Policy Subcommittee has worked extensively to update their assigned employee policies in the Personnel Policy Manual and Policy Manual Attachments. This included updating policies and having them reviewed and approved by the Leadership Team, an outside consultant, and the Board of Directors Personnel Committee. Two noteworthy additions to the policies were an expanded scope of protected classes as recommended by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), as well as ensuring that the Affirmative Action / Equal Opportunity and Discrimination / Harassment / Intimidation policies met the conditions of inclusion in the Commonwealth's JAGGAER (contractor system). Ultimately, the Personnel Policy Manual and Policy Manual Attachments were finalized, approved, and distributed to staff in June 2023. The Subcommittee now turns its attention to other projects, including continued work on hiring procedures and review of the employee annual performance review form.
- The DEI External Work Subcommittee continues to work on its initiative to expand its scope with community-based organizations.