University of Minnesota Law School to Launch Racial Justice Law Clinic

MARCH 16, 2022—The University Minnesota Law School today announced that it will establish a Racial Justice Law Clinic to target deeply embedded, systemic racial inequalities and discrimination while training future lawyers to make an impact on this critical work.

The clinic will have rich opportunities to make a difference in numerous areas, including the criminal legal system, voting rights, education, employment, and housing. With a deep commitment to creating a more just society, the Law School and its new clinic will give students and faculty another vehicle for pursuing racial justice and equity, says Dean Garry W. Jenkins.

“I’m thrilled about the launch of our new Racial Justice Law Clinic. The persistence of racial injustice has harmed communities for a long time. But this is a unique moment in our nation’s history and our city’s history where there is a lot of interest and momentum in looking for and adopting forward-looking solutions to address systemic injustices,” Jenkins says. “This new clinic will deepen Minnesota Law’s important role in serving the state by bringing a high-impact, sophisticated legal entity solely devoted to racial equity and justice to Minneapolis.”

Liliana Zaragoza, joining the law school as an associate clinical professor of law, will lead the clinic. She comes to Minnesota Law from the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, where she worked as an assistant counsel. Zaragoza is the proud daughter of an immigrant, single-mother from Mexico.

The clinic’s racial justice seminar and hands-on experience will give future lawyers the skills they need to advocate as lawyers to advance equity and justice. “The seminar will encourage them to view the law through the lens of critical race theory,” she says. “And through their casework, students will learn how to engage in client-centered and movement-led lawyering in service of racial justice, equity, and liberation for our communities.”
The clinic’s work will involve meeting and building relationships with community groups, community organizers, nonprofits, lawyers, and other leaders in the Twin Cities to learn about local priority issue areas and work together to address them. Through this outreach, clinic faculty, law students, and community members will develop a strategic direction and a docket of cases to pursue—both direct-service matters and impact litigation.

The Racial Justice Law Clinic will also collaborate with Minnesota Law’s more than two dozen other law clinics, many of which have overlapping interests.

“As an institution, we routinely see unmet need and opportunities to make critical change in arenas that affect the rights and wellbeing of traditionally under-resourced people,” says Professor Perry Moriearty, co-director of Law Clinics. “In Minnesota, more often than not, we’re talking about BIPOC individuals and communities. Our disparities are among the worst in the nation in almost every measure of social welfare and social control.”

There are many opportunities to make change in the criminal justice system, from policing to prosecution to defense to sentencing and corrections, Moriearty continues. “That’s what makes me especially excited about having someone so personally committed to racial justice and civil rights like Liliana. Her clinic will allow both community members and students to have a voice and be on the cutting edge of meaningful change.”

Professor Steve Meili believes the new clinic will spur more conversations about racial injustice and systemic racism in the Law School, among students, faculty, administrators, and alumni, and “that’s good for the entire community. This is the moment when the Law School and the country need this kind of clinic to address the issue of systemic racism that has given rise to tragedies such as the murders of George Floyd and Amir Locke, among others.”

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*Founded in 1888, the University of Minnesota Law School is among the top public law schools in the country. Its more than two dozen law clinics provide thousands of hours of free legal assistance to individuals, nonprofits, and local businesses in a wide range of legal areas.*