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TALS Focuses on Transforming Legal Services, Celebrates Leaders in Access to Justice

NASHVILLE - The Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services' (TALS) will host its annual Equal Justice University for lawyers, advocates, social workers, and others September 21-23. This year's conference will be online, and the theme, "Transforming Legal Services Together: Recipes for Recovery" reflects a focus on using what advocates have learned during the pandemic to adapt and strengthen Tennessee's legal services delivery models.

Outstanding keynote speakers and expert presenters will explore taking a strengths-based approach to adversity, solutions for legal issues arising from the pandemic, and how to infuse diversity, equity and inclusion into our work. Equal Justice University combines cutting edge programming with an inspiring celebration of seasoned leaders and new advocates who are making the civil justice system in Tennessee stronger and more accessible to those who would otherwise be left to navigate the courts alone.

Access to Justice Awards

At the conference, TALS presents prestigious Access to Justice Awards to recognize outstanding service to the equal justice community.

“A highlight of EJU is celebrating advocates who make our civil justice system available to people who are marginalized and would otherwise have no voice in navigating our complicated legal system to protect their rights,” Ann Pruitt, TALS Executive Director, said.

During Equal Justice University, TALS will recognize four honorees for their extraordinary work to promote access to justice in Tennessee.

Lifetime Achievement Award: David J. Tarpley, Nashville Housing/Consumer Unit Lead, Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee & the Cumberland is the recipient of TALS’ newly established Lifetime Achievement Award, for his extraordinary body of work spanning fifty one (51) years as a staff attorney at legal aid. Mr. Tarpley is widely considered to be the consumer rights expert of Tennessee’s legal services community based on his legal expertise, integrity and passion.

Pruitt said, “He is the first attorney consulted when there is a need for complex legal analysis or thoughtful testimony about proposed consumer legislation, or sound advice about individual consumer protection cases.’

Stewart Clifton, Clifton Government Relations added, “David Tarpley has profoundly impacted Tennessee’s body of consumer law by drafting proposed legislation, submitting oral and written comments and appearing before legislative committees”.

Janice M. Holder Access to Justice Award: Judge Rachel Bell, Davidson County General Sessions Court, is the 2021 Janice M. Holder Access to Justice Award recipient for her strategic leadership to ensure the legal system is open and available to all. The award was created in honor of Janice M. Holder, the first female Chief Justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court, who spearheaded the creation of Tennessee’s Access to Justice Commission during her tenure as Chief Justice.

DarKenya W. Waller, Executive Director of LAS, TALS' board chair and Equal Justice University Design Team Chair, stated, "Judge Bell's innovative approaches to addressing pressing legal issues have made the legal system in Davidson County more accessible and are being recognized as a national model."

Judge Bell's General Sessions Music City Community Court, Division VIII, is a diversionary court offering alternatives to sentencing for persons convicted of low-level crimes and providing programs including community service and training to help stem the effects of a criminal conviction. Judge Bell is also known for establishing expungement and fee waiver clinics that open the door to drivers license reinstatement and employment opportunities for hundreds of Nashvillians attending each clinic. During the pandemic, Judge Bell took action to address the needs of tenants and landlords. She established the Housing Resource Diversionary Court (HRDC), a streamlined court that receives all eviction cases filed in Davidson County General Sessions Court due to nonpayment of rent and connects the parties to financial assistance programs, legal assistance and mediation services.

New Advocate of the Year: During 2021, attorneys practicing less than five years in the public interest law arena made significant contributions to advancing access to justice, and TALS is recognizing two New Advocate of the Year Award honorees.

Wesley Dozier, attorney and Equal Justice Works Fellow at Just City, is a recipient of the 2021 New Advocate of the Year Award. Many people who are eligible for criminal records expungement cannot afford to do so because they are unable to pay outstanding fines and court costs. Recognizing this, Dozier focused his Equal Justice Works Fellowship on a critical community need: representing citizens of Memphis in securing court debt waivers to allow for successful criminal records expungement.

"Wesley's passionate advocacy is a force multiplier for his clients because expungement of eligible criminal records expands employment opportunities,

improves housing options, increases economic self-sufficiency and allows our citizens to restore their voting rights so they can participate in the political process,” said Sharon R. Ryan, Senior Vice President, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary of International Paper Company, sponsor of Mr. Dozier’s Equal Justice Works Fellowship.

Alexandra Rogers, attorney, Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberlands (LAS) is also a New Advocate of the Year honoree. Ms. Rogers has quickly become known for her fierce advocacy on behalf of domestic violence survivors, ensuring that her clients can live in safety. During the pandemic, she also organized phone-based legal clinics when the in-person model was no longer possible. Additionally, Ms. Rogers applied her dedication to skill building internally by leading the LAS Racial Justice and Equity Team’s Implicit Bias subcommittee, bringing cultural competency training to the firm to increase understanding of personal biases in support of a more just and equitable community.

“Alexandra Rogers not only achieved stellar outcomes for her clients, she leveraged her outreach skills to build new relationships in the community, broadening the firm’s ability to serve our neighbors in need,” added DarKenya W. Waller.

Learn More

To learn more about TALS and the 2020 access to justice award honorees visit <https://www.tals.org/eju>.

Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services (TALS) is a statewide non-profit organization that builds tools and partnerships to strengthen the delivery of civil legal services for low-income and elderly Tennesseans. TALS manages a web portal providing legal information- www.HELP4TN.org, and staffs 1-888-HELP4TN, a toll-free civil legal advice and information phone line. Learn more at www.tals.org.

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