

THE

ROAD AHEAD:

MOBILE JUSTICE & MOVEMENT LAWYERING





Photo by Sung Park / courtesy of Benefits Law Center

Justice on a bus drives fundamental change in the delivery of legal services

BY COLIN RIGLEY

There's the hum of a diesel engine and legato chatter filtered through a megaphone. It's a crisp, sunny October morning in 2018 and a group of about 50 people are pinballing between used lawn care equipment, bicycles, and vehicles at a King County lot, trailing an auctioneer in a golf cart as he sells off the lot piece by piece to the highest bidders.

Within the crowd is the staff from the Benefits Law Center (BLC). After years of planning, fundraising, and problem-solving, they're hoping to turn an idea into reality—a project at a Venn diagram nexus of legal innovation, access to justice, and plain-old common sense.

But first they need a bus.

In a video BLC posted to Instagram, Executive Director Alex Doolittle speaks directly to the camera, with rows of retired county vehicles in frame behind her—and for someone spending her Saturday bus hunting, she sounds really excited.

"I'm here at the King County bus yard and I am shopping for a bus," Doolittle says in the video. "I'm going to turn it into a mobile legal vehicle so that we can deliver services from anywhere."

About a year later, in September 2019, BLC officially hit the road with its retrofitted county 2008 Starcraft bus, the first mobile legal unit in the state, according to BLC—they call it the "Justice Bus."

More than just a novel way to take a law office on the road, the Justice Bus represents a major shift in the way lawyers can help the communities they serve. The project is both an acknowledgment of challenges in the legal system and part of the process toward making things better.

GETTING UP AND RUNNING

Formerly known as the Seattle Community Law Center, BLC has provided legal advice and representation to low-income individuals in King County and the surrounding area in matters of Social Security disability and SSI benefits since 1997. Its services are focused on providing low-cost or no-cost legal services to people who would otherwise "fall through the cracks," according to BLC materials—namely people who live on income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, who live with disabilities, who are experiencing homelessness, and who face other barriers.

The Justice Bus began as an offhand joke back in 2012. It was a bad idea, but as far as bad ideas go, it was pretty good. Budget shortfalls in legal aid were forcing service providers to get creative and find ways to provide the same services, if not more, with less funding.

"I said we could put attorneys in bread trucks and send them out across the state; they can live in the car and deliver legal aid," Doolittle recalled of a meeting with other legal aid officials. "Everyone sort of scoffed like it was a terrible idea—and it was a terrible idea—but the idea stuck."

It stuck because of the very solvable challenges many BLC clients face in getting to their lawyer—lack of access to basic resources some take for granted, like transportation or childcare. So the solution seemed obvious: Bring the lawyers to them.

BLC had developed partnerships with a number of social service providers in King County, like food banks and shelters, and could coordinate with staff and caseworkers not only to identify people in need of help, but occasionally to use their facilities to meet with clients—big emphasis on *occasionally*, as those organizations "are just packed to the gills from the time the doors open to the time the doors close," Doolittle said.

Before there was a bus, BLC went mobile in a smaller way. In 2016, it secured seed funding to hire its first "mobile attorney" dedicated to meeting clients where they were. In practice, this meant an attorney who would hop in his Chrysler and drive to clients, grabbing an open desk or office where available, beginning to build relationships with community partners in South King County, and

The Road Ahead: Mobile Justice & Movement Lawyering

CONTINUED >

occasionally meeting clients in less ideal public locations like a coffee shop. By summer 2018, BLC secured additional funding to purchase a mobile legal unit and a month later it had a bus.

Daniel Parker joined BLC in 2017, two years out of law school at Seattle University, and with the specific intent to be the first BLC mobile attorney. So it didn't strike him as odd to be out bus shopping a year into the new job.

"When I started this, I knew it was going to be not-your-typical-lawyer role," he said.

Parker is now one of two mobile attorneys, the other being Becca Maloney, who graduated from the University of California, Irvine School of Law, moved to Seattle, and came into contact with BLC while working with local legal aid organizations. When the second mobile attorney slot opened in January 2019, she was all in.

"I was more than excited to hop on board," Maloney said.

On a recent afternoon, Maloney and Parker both literally hopped on board to walk *NWLawyer* through the Justice Bus. A bit of redesign, courtesy of the American Institute of Architects Seattle Committee on Homelessness, transformed the old utilitarian rubberized floors, red vinyl bench seating, and characteristically bus-ey interior into something more inviting for clients. Today, the Justice Bus is filled with the soft yellow glow of ceiling-mounted rim lighting. There are privacy curtains for the windows, new flooring, and ample seating and desk space for clients to meet with their mobile attorney—even enough space to accommodate a full family

**Washington's
Justice Bus differs
from others not just
in form, but function.**

when needed. The bus came pre-equipped with a wheelchair lift, and now has an unmistakable teal paint job and BLC branding to make it easily identifiable for new clients. Parker and Maloney have a kettle to warm up coffee and tea, space heater, and mobile Wi-Fi hotspot, all of which are powered by a dedicated battery to keep things humming when the engine's off. It's a new concept for BLC, so there are still a few kinks to work out.

"It's a slow roll," Parker said. Sometimes literally, like when he almost got himself stuck while trying to navigate 5 tons and 20 feet of Justice Bus out of a narrow library parking lot.

According to BLC staff, theirs is the only bus of its kind in Washington. Similar projects are peppered throughout the U.S. in places like California, Kentucky, Ohio, Connecticut, and Chicago.

The buses associated with these programs don't come cheap. Legal Aid of the Bluegrass in Kentucky, for example, launched its Justice Bus project with a comparatively newer and costlier 2017 Mercedes Sprinter van,¹ with an estimated price tag between about \$28,000 and \$34,000.

The initial specs for BLC's Justice Bus were far higher than what ultimately was spent, and Doolittle credits the savings to building relationships within the community. The early plan to pick up a new Sprinter van turned out to be more Rolls-Royce than Mystery Machine, with an estimated purchase cost of about \$80,000 to \$90,000. Through the connections BLC had already established, Doolittle learned that she could get a bus on the cheap at auction. BLC scored its 2008 Starcraft bus for a measly \$1,965, leaving plenty of budget for mainte-



Pictured left to right, Darren Edwards of Boomslang Fabrication; BLC staff Daniel Parker, Becca Maloney, and Alex Doolittle; and Russ Johnson, personal property supervisor at King County Fleet Administration Division.

AT RIGHT: A look inside the Justice Bus.

ONLINE RESOURCES

For more information on the concepts covered in this article, check out the following links.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

- **Washington State Health Care Authority:** hca.wa.gov/about-hca/trauma-informed-approach-tia
- **National Council for Behavioral Health:** thenationalcouncil.org/areas-of-expertise/trauma-informed-behavioral-healthcare
- **Center for Social Innovation:** c4innovates.com/training-technical-assistance

ECONOMIC AND RACIAL JUSTICE

- **JustLead Washington:** justleadwa.org/learn
- **Washington Race Equity & Justice Initiative:** wareji.org/resources
- **Shriver Center on Poverty Law:** povertylaw.org
- **Alliance for Equal Justice:** allianceforequaljustice.org/for-the-alliance/state-plan/
- **WSBA Diversity Stakeholders List Serve:** To sign up, email diversity@wsba.org.



that the problems they experience have a legal dimension and that they would benefit from getting legal help.” BLC delivers right-sized services to meet client needs weekly at a variety of locations, coordinated through partner agencies that offer wrap-around human services and are trained by BLC to spot legal issues.

CLEARING ROADBLOCKS

In a way, the Justice Bus is the physical manifestation of a deeper BLC philosophy that attorneys need to reframe their perspective,

not just on how they should solve a client’s legal issues, but on the realities of life that prevent people from accessing legal aid in the first place.

“The legal system is built to be efficient for lawyers and judges,” Doolittle said. “So the question is: How can it be better built for clients?”

The Justice Bus helps solve one of the logistical barriers to legal aid, but BLC attorneys are constantly looking for new ways to better understand their clients’ unique lived experiences.

“We think about it all the time,” Maloney said. “Getting to that point takes practice

and a great amount of thoughtfulness.”

“We go into a space understanding we are not the ones dictating services,” Parker added.

Doolittle agrees: “Our original mistake was deciding we were going to do a thing, then go out and do it without talking to anyone else.” BLC has since recognized community partnerships as a critical nexus between BLC’s legal services and community engagement. These partnerships help BLC understand what members of the community need in order for BLC lawyers to develop more impactful solutions.

One of the organizations BLC talks to is the Multi-Service Center (MSC), which provides education and employment assistance, shelter and food, and other resources in multiple locations around South King County.

Robin Corak, CEO of MSC, said many of its customers (MSC’s preferred term for people who use its services) face not only transportation challenges, but multiple constraints on their time and energy just to have their basic needs met.

“It’s a long day for some of our people,” Corak said. “And if they’re working, oftentimes it’s just a matter of them having to take time off of work, and hopefully they can work around that. But it certainly can be a challenge for some of our customers.”

Some customers lack ID and other essential documents, or they’re facing an eviction, or spend most of their day traveling and waiting in line to bathe and get a meal. And often there are past traumas that shape all interactions and can mean the difference between getting the help they need or being churned through and spit out right where they started.

“I think that sometimes life circumstances are so overwhelming, particularly if you’re trying to apply for Social Security,” Corak said. “So in those situations a case manager might give a customer a referral [to a lawyer], but when the customer steps out there the barriers might be so overwhelming.”

Other services—like legal aid clinics—can easily go unnoticed and underused. Many people who utilize MSC, Corak said, aren’t even aware of the possibility of getting legal help unless there’s a partnership between the legal provider and the community organization that facilitates a smooth connection between intake at a shelter, for example, to a referral for legal aid.

“It’s kind of this if-you-build-it-they-will-come [approach],” Corak said. “But it doesn’t always work that way. ... Visibility and presence in the community [go] a long way; I

nance and redesign as a mobile legal office.

Washington’s Justice Bus also differs from others not just in form, but function. Other buses follow the legal clinic model, but with more mobility. In California, OneJustice’s Justice Bus Project gathers volunteer attorneys and law students from the urban hubs of San Francisco and Los Angeles and sends them out to rural communities for one-day legal clinics.² Such clinics might provide short-term help, but only for people who know they have a legal issue; according to the 2015 Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study Update, however, “[a] majority of low-income people do not understand

The Road Ahead: Mobile Justice & Movement Lawyering

CONTINUED >

think that's why the partnerships are so critical. A lot of the people that come to us don't know about all the [legal] services we provide; they just know we're a food bank in the area."

Then there's the emotional toll that comes from scheduling appointments to access services. When someone is spending much of their time and energy scrambling for adequate food, shelter, and medical care, seeking legal services might not make the cut on their to-do list, especially if those services require another trip or scheduling hassle.

"We forget that when someone's in crisis, their mind's just in survival mode," Corak said. "If we give somebody a whole chunk of things to do, it can be overwhelming."

A BEND IN THE ROAD

One driver of a more holistic approach to delivering services is trauma-informed care, which Corak said takes into account how to "understand some of the behaviors that seem to be one thing, but they're really related to trauma; it will teach you to make sure to the best of your ability that [you're] not retriggering people in how [you're] asking questions."

"A lot of times, people just need to be heard," Corak said. "They just need a safe space to share information and be heard."

That idea—engaging with people on a personal level before throwing legal advice at them—is part of a push toward "movement lawyering," a fundamental shift in approach to delivering legal aid.

One of the many organizations at the forefront of this concept in Washington, working to bolster a network of legal and community leaders, is JustLead Washington.³

"When you get all the way down to what we're trying to collectively accomplish when we speak of equity, we are talking about shifting power," said Omid Bagheri, JustLead's director of equity and community partnership. "And power looks a few different ways. It is access to resources, information for those in marginalized communities who are subjected to exclusionary policies. On an individual level, it's shifting the power of lawyers to their clients. Oftentimes lawyers have been taught they always have something to offer, they know what's best, the client will not know what's best. We would say this paradigm becomes a barrier to ensuring clients, and es-

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pecially those who are being marginalized by unjust policies and systemic issues, receive the legal support they actually deserve."

Bagheri says this dynamic extends to other professions as well, especially those that require highly technical higher education, but in a legal context it boxes out the lived experiences of "people who are most affected by injustice" and perpetuates systemic failures.

"We have to be able to say, organizationally, we don't have all the answers," Bagheri said. So what could this shift in power look like on the ground? "Most practically, it is organizations creating and incentivizing time and resources for legal advocates to go out in the community, build relationships for the long term with leaders in the community instead of the status quo, which depends on people needing to come to the organization, come to the lawyer to get what they need, which is not possible for most people who need support and especially for communities of color already dealing with systemic issues aimed at them."

The early fruits of this idea are codified in the Washington Race Equity & Justice Initiative (REJI) Organizational Race Equity Toolkit,⁴ which JustLead developed in partnership with the Washington State Office of Civil Legal Aid, Washington State Access to Justice Board, and dozens of other legal aid organizations around the state that have made a commitment to do race equity work. These include BLC and legal advocates already working to advance these strategies within the legal field. One section of the toolkit outlines a community-centric process toward "developing accountability to and partnership with communities of color," and details how legal professionals can engage with community stakeholders and collaborate with those who are most affected by racial injustice.

"When applied to community partnerships, we are ensuring that organizational decisions are understood and justified by

the communities that may benefit or be harmed most," the toolkit states in its introduction. "Those working within the law and justice community in particular have a unique responsibility to ensure that the potential impact of strategies and decisions are understood. With our power to do good, we must also stay vigilant of our power to unintentionally commit harm."

JustLead is also in the process of finalizing a "Community Partnership Guide." An early draft provided to *NWLawyer* describes a "movement lawyering mindset," and the "process through which advocates contribute their legal knowledge and skills to support initiatives that are identified by the community and enhance the community's power." It highlights "upstream thinking" aimed at preventing further injustice in the future beyond bandaging immediate legal problems.

"It's about creating a broad network of folks who understand this work and are willing to shift resources in this way; that's going to increase justice for all people," Bagheri said. "... Justice will not be achieved with the way we've been doing things."

It's yet to be seen what impact something like the Justice Bus can have on delivering services. Will it be the catalyst for similar projects elsewhere, or just one novel idea in addressing one of the symptoms of the bigger challenges in the legal system? Right now it's too early to tell, but so far the feedback from BLC clients has been positive and the things BLC attorneys are learning about their clients' needs have only spurred more improvements. Back at the BLC offices, when Doolittle, Parker, and Maloney were asked about the project's success so far and where they think it could go, they spoke of it like any work in progress: sure, it's no panacea, but things are going well and there's loads of potential.

"I do think it has the ability to change the landscape of legal aid by adding to it and making it more accessible," Doolittle said. "... There are still ways to improve the practice of law." 🗣️

NOTES:

1. http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/kentucky_legal_aid_bluegrass_justice_bus.
2. <https://onejustice.org/probonojustice/justice-bus-project/>.
3. Several WSBA staff members serve on the JustLead Board of Directors.
4. <https://justleadwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/REJI-Organizational-Toolkit-Full-1.pdf> at page 40-48.