

Economic Justice Project

From its founding, a central mission of the City University of New York has been to offer educational and economic opportunity to low-income New Yorkers, to provide a pathway to the middle class, and to promote the economic and social mobility that is the cornerstone of a democratic society.

Unfortunately, significant obstacles prevent realization of this dream for many of the poorest Americans who rely on public benefits to meet basic needs. Federal “welfare reform” and subsequent state and federal welfare policies all but closed the door to higher education for many families living in poverty. These policies forced tens of thousands of low-income CUNY students to drop out of school and abandon their pursuit of economic advancement in order to perform “workfare” assignments. Many of these students were single parents determined to obtain the skills and credentials needed to secure living-wage employment, move their families out of poverty, and improve the life chances of their children; others were teenagers or young adults in families so poor as to qualify for public assistance.

CUNY School of Law launched the [Economic Justice Project \(EJP\)](#) in response to the social justice crisis triggered by these regressive welfare policies. EJP interns operate on several fronts, providing direct representation to hundreds of CUNY undergraduates, collaborating closely with and supporting the organizing and political efforts of the Welfare Rights Initiative and other grassroots organizations, and engaging in legislative and other systemic advocacy.

PRACTICE HIGHLIGHTS

Public education and outreach: To solidify this legislative victory and begin to undo the damage caused by decades of policy that restricted access to higher education, EJP and WRI are embarking on an extensive outreach campaign to educate current and prospective four-year-college students about the change in law and to assist them in maintaining critical public supports for themselves and their families.

Challenging agency errors: We are also continuing our strategic advocacy at the city and state levels to identify and remedy protracted problems affecting large groups of public assistance recipients as the result of decades of bureaucratic neglect and ideological opposition to equal access to higher education for the poor. Finally, we continue our individual representation of CUNY students receiving public benefits to vindicate their rights and facilitate achievement of their educational and career goals.



EJP Faculty staff and clinic interns 2015

SPOTLIGHT

Influencing Public Policy: In Spring 2014, the New York Legislature enacted a law that - for the first time - allows welfare recipients to meet a substantial part of their “workfare” obligations through studies in four-year college. EJP drafted the initial version of the law and has labored for years, in collaboration with the Education and Training Taskforce and the Welfare Rights Initiative, to secure its passage. Before this reform, welfare policies in New York all but excluded poor families from four-year college. The adoption of the law may open opportunities for thousands of poor families and, given the link between educational attainment and economic mobility, holds out the possibility of transformative change.



PROJECTS AND PARTNERS

Trainings: Provide training for community members on accessing benefits, including victims of domestic violence, immigrants and individuals transitioning off of public benefits.

Collaboration: EJP students work with grass-roots public advocacy organizations in education and training efforts and policy reform campaigns that address the right to education.

Partners: Welfare Rights Initiative at Hunter College and the Education Task Force.