

Merf Ehman

As executive director of Columbia Legal Services (CLS), I'm leading organization-wide efforts to prioritize advocacy that supports community-led social justice movements that transform racialized systems and eradicate racism. Organizationally, CLS and I are focused on creating an adaptive organization that prioritizes anti-racist efforts internally and externally, and learning how to use our legal skills to support and build collective power around initiatives identified by the communities most impacted. I credit the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond for training, supporting, and challenging me and CLS staff on what it means to be an anti-racist organization and for informing the personal, internal work that I need to do as a white person and leader.

More than 25 years ago, I was a client in a welfare-to-work program at a local legal aid office, and now lead a legal aid organization working to change the world for the better. My life experience has been informed by other people believing that I could be more, and do more, than the limited options that felt available. People and institutions supported me in moving beyond the challenges of poverty, mental illness, and substance abuse to an unimaginably wonderful life. I want those same organizations, people, and institutions to work toward ending racism so that all people enjoy a full life free from trauma and abuse. Additionally, I prefer to be as pronoun free as possible.