



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 18, 2024

Conservation Law Center Launches New Legal Aid Program to Advance Environmental Health and Equity in Gary, Hammond, East Chicago, and Whiting



(Bloomington, IN) - Today, the Conservation Law Center (“CLC”) at Indiana University’s Maurer School of Law announces the launch of the organization’s Environmental Legal Aid Program to serve the environmental legal needs of local residents, advocates and community groups in Gary, Hammond, Whiting and East Chicago (“the Region”). The new program builds on CLC’s mission of providing free representation to environmental non-profits tackling critical environmental health and justice issues, as well conservation organizations engaged in protecting natural resources, water quality, and wildlife habitat.

The Environmental Legal Aid Program will serve the Black and Hispanic communities in Gary, Hammond, East Chicago, and Whiting that have long been exposed to extreme levels of toxic pollution from the highest concentration of heavy industry in the state and suffer the highest rates of asthma, cancer, and pollution-induced disease than almost anywhere else in the nation.¹ CLC’s

¹ See e.g., <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/african-americans-hispanics-exposed-to-more-air-pollution-than-whites> (citing a study from the National Academy of Sciences finding that Black and Hispanic people are exposed to

new free legal program is designed to help residents overcome systemic barriers that have led to these environmental inequities by providing legal, scientific, and technical resources that residents need to more effectively advocate for improved environmental protection in the Region.

To lead the effort, CLC hired attorney Michael Zoeller, a native Hoosier and seasoned environmental lawyer. Formerly with the U.S. Department of Justice and more recently, with the Chicago-based Environmental Law & Policy Center (“ELPC”), Zoeller has more than thirty years of experience in civil litigation including representing the U.S. EPA and other federal agencies in enforcement actions under the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Superfund, and other environmental statutes. During his tenure at the Department of Justice, Zoeller was an advocate for environmental justice initiatives, conducted community outreach in several cases, and served in the recently created Office of Environmental Justice.



Since 2022, Zoeller has been leading ELPC’s Northwest Indiana-focused work representing individuals and community groups in Gary. A notable example, Zoeller, along CLC attorney Kim Ferraro, are representing a local frontline group, Gary Advocates for Responsible Development (“GARD”), in appealing an air permit issued by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management to allow California-based Fulcrum Centerpoint, LLC to build a new trash-to-jet-fuel “biorefinery” near Lake Michigan. GARD’s members and others understandably worry that Fulcrum’s plans to “gasify” more than 1600 tons of trash per day at the plant will spew even more toxic pollution into Gary’s already dirty air.²

“It is next to impossible for community groups to challenge environmental decisions that impact their health and environment without additional expertise to help navigate the scientific and legal complexities involved,” said GARD president Dorreen Carey. “Mike and Kim were instrumental in getting our concerns heard by local industry and government agencies. Their knowledge and advocacy will provide a much needed community resource for groups and residents throughout the Region.”

CLC’s Environmental Legal Aid Program is based on a “community lawyering” model aimed at empowering citizen-driven advocacy where education, legal advice, and litigation are used to complement rather than displace the community’s voice. To that end, CLC will be conducting listening sessions throughout the Region in the coming months, and meeting with local activists, community groups, faith-based organizations, and other local leaders to better understand the environmental challenges of greatest concern to them. Those community-identified concerns will direct CLC’s work in the Region and any legal action taken.

56% and 63% respectively more air pollution than they generate, while Whites are exposed to 17% less air pollution than they produce).

² See <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/12122022/gary-indiana-plastic-jet-fuel/>

Christian Freitag, Director of Conservation Law Center, commented “As a native of the Region, I’m personally excited to do such important work in a place that’s historically been both targeted by industry and neglected by government. Kim Ferraro and Mike Zoeller have made their careers helping communities address health and justice issues, and I can’t think of anyone better equipped to push us forward. But most importantly, we’re committed to the communities themselves driving the priorities.” Mike Zoeller added, “Residents of the Region are passionate about the future of their communities. I am thrilled to be joining CLC to advise and represent local activists who are in the best position to identify the issues that need to be addressed.”

Founded in 2005, CLC is the only Indiana-based nonprofit law firm dedicated to addressing some of the most pressing environmental problems through public interest litigation, policy advocacy, and other legal tools. CLC also operates the Conservation Law Clinic at Indiana University’s Maurer School of Law, where law students develop essential lawyering skills working with senior attorneys representing CLC clients in active cases. CLC’s Environmental Legal Aid Program will provide additional opportunities for law students to understand the systemic interconnections between environmental and social justice challenges where lawyers can play pivotal roles alongside impacted communities in developing and implementing solutions based on access to justice, increasing democratic participation, and fighting structural barriers.

...

Contact:
Andrea Lutz
Conservation Law Center, Inc.
116 S. Indiana, Suite 4
Bloomington, Indiana 47408
Ph: (812) 856-0819
Email: andlutz@iu.edu

ABOUT: Conservation Law Center (the Center) is an independent, non-profit organization that provides legal counsel to conservation organizations and works to improve state and federal conservation law and policy. The organization works with clients on a wide range of transactional, policy, and litigation matters pertaining to both regional and national conservation issues. The Center has particular interest and expertise endangered species protection and litigation, natural habitat protection, conservation easements, and the protection of freshwater ecosystems especially in the Great Lakes region. Conservation Law Center was founded in 2005 by attorney W. William Weeks, former EVP and COO of The Nature Conservancy, who currently serves as the Center’s board chair.

The Center also operates the Conservation Law Clinic in partnership with the Indiana University Maurer School of Law in Bloomington. In that capacity, the Center works with student interns on its live projects, advising clients and researching legal and policy solutions on regional and national conservation issues.

More information about Conservation Law Center is available at:
<http://www.conservationlawcenter.org>.