

Remarks from United States Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta
New York Law School Access to Justice Virtual Conference
June 8, 2022

Good morning, and welcome. I am delighted to help kick off the Tenth Annual Law School Access to Justice Conference. New York's Permanent Commission on Access to Justice has been a leader on these issues since 2010. I especially appreciate that the Commission has been helping law schools and law students get involved for more than a decade now. It's inspiring that so many of you have gathered here today to discuss law schools' role in expanding access to justice in our society.

I'd like to begin by thanking Chief Judge DiFiore, Dean Ouellette, Helaine Barnett, and Jim Sandman for inviting me to be here.

I'm especially excited to be speaking to the law students in the audience. It gives me great hope for our country—and the ideals we strive to uphold—that you are passionate about access to justice at this early stage of your career, and that your law schools are working hard to prepare you to do impactful work as lawyers.

We know the incredible responsibility, and power, that we have as members of the legal profession.

During the height of the Civil Rights Movement, then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy urged members of the legal profession, as part of their obligation to support equal justice under law, to use their knowledge and skills to advance the rights of those who are most vulnerable.

He said: "It is time we used those traditional skills—our precision, our understanding of technicalities, our adversary skills, our negotiating skills, our understanding of procedural maneuvers—on behalf of the poor. Only when we have done all these things, when we've created in fact a system of equal Justice for all—a system which recognizes in fact the dignity of all [people]—will our profession have lived up to its responsibilities."

We at the Department of Justice have a weighty responsibility to uphold these ideals. One of our most important duties is to protect civil rights and ensure equal justice for all. And we know this cannot be accomplished without equal *access* to justice for all.

That is why last fall, Attorney General Garland announced that the Department of Justice would reinvigorate its role in leading access-to-justice policy initiatives across government through the re-launch of the Office for Access to Justice.

Leading up to the launch, my staff met with almost every state access-to-justice commission across the country.

We were pleased to hear from the New York State Permanent Commission, and we were grateful to speak with and learn from Chair Barnett and Barbara Mulé in those meetings.

Our Office for Access to Justice is now 14 people strong, and we look forward to continued collaboration with the Permanent Commission.

As future lawyers, you too have a weighty responsibility. Our society counts on members of the legal profession—a profession that you will soon be joining—to transform our values into real protections for real people.

But even before you become members of the Bar, you can help close the gap between our notions of justice and the real-life experiences of our neighbors and community members.

Law schools and law students play a critical role in ensuring that legal services are available to those who can't afford them. As this conference highlights, that role has become especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed and exacerbated existing structural disparities in our society.

To take one important example, the pandemic intensified an existing eviction and housing crisis across the country. Law schools in New York and across the United States have stepped up in response.

In August of last year, the Attorney General issued a Call to Action to the Legal Profession, asking lawyers and law students to take immediate steps to address the housing and eviction crisis.

99 law schools responded, including *every* law school in New York. And you have done amazing work: students from NYU and Fordham, for example, quickly partnered to launch a Housing Justice Initiative and train law students across New York City to help at-risk tenants apply for Emergency Rental Assistance. In fall 2021 alone, students in NYU's Housing Law Clinic helped nearly 60 families stay housed.

Students and faculty—including many of you here at this conference—have done critical work to protect and advocate for vulnerable residents in danger of losing their homes during the pandemic. You have connected potential litigants with rental assistance programs, mediated disputes, and represented the unrepresented in court.

Thank you for all of your efforts.

These steps are only examples, and they are only the beginning. There is so much more to do. Making the promise of access to justice real means more than a successful day in court. It can prevent catastrophe, including separation from family members and children, loss of housing, debt collectors garnishing wages, or domestic violence victims left without restraining orders.

Law students are uniquely positioned to think creatively in solving real-world problems, and we need all of you on board. I urge you to stay engaged and to get as much hands-on experience as you can—including through clinics, internships, and pro bono work while you are in law school.

I speak from personal experience: I participated in two clinics as an NYU Law student, and those experiences ignited my passion for civil rights law and helped inspire my career.

I also want to be clear that, although the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated disparities in access to justice, our innovative efforts to combat the justice gap cannot end when the pandemic ends.

Access to justice is part of the foundation of this country and the ideals we are still striving to realize: the promises of freedom, equity, and justice for all. Disrupting the devastating connections between race, poverty, and injustice requires commitment from all of us. That is why I am so pleased to welcome you all to this conference, as you fight for and work towards change.

Thank you for your commitment to equal access to justice. The Justice Department looks forward to continued partnership with you. And I look forward to seeing all the ways you will change the world.