

Rooting Out Inequities and Racism in the Criminal Justice System

National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers



Since its founding in 1958, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL) has worked to ensure fairness within the criminal justice system and to strengthen its members' capacity to safeguard fundamental constitutional rights. The group now projects—with clarity—its commitment to be a strong voice for redressing the systemic racism that all too often leaves defendants without fair legal representation and due process.

While the goals of NACDL and its grantmaking arm, the Foundation for Criminal Justice (FCJ), have historically been in sync, their relationship had never been clearly defined, thus dampening their joint impact. In 2016, NACDL charged TCC Group with developing a comprehensive strategic plan that would help NACDL and FCJ clarify their respective roles and redirect their efforts toward a common purpose.

"The challenge," says NACDL Executive Director Norman Reimer, "lay in harmonizing the work of two entities with separate boards and, at times, imperfectly aligned missions."

In the first stage of the project, TCC Group conducted an exhaustive discovery process, gathering insights and data through interviews with multiple constituencies, including members, funders, and the boards of both NACDL and FSJ, as well as professionals across the entire criminal justice reform space.

Strategy

Stakeholder
Engagement

Strategic
Communication

Social Justice

Advocacy &
Community
Building

“NACDL has never wavered in its determination to ensure that accused persons aren’t deprived of their rights—or forced to forgo legal representation because they can’t afford it,” says Julie Simpson, Partner and Director of Nonprofit Strategy and Capacity Building at TCC Group. “We were tremendously energized by the opportunity to partner with NACDL and apply our strategic expertise to magnify their contribution to and involvement in this pressing social problem.”

This marked the first time, says Reimer, “that our very reason for existence as an organization had been clearly articulated.”

Adopted by NACDL in 2018, the strategic plan will guide NACDL through the next three-to-five years. Many of its objectives have already been achieved, including the renaming of the FCJ as the NACDL Foundation for Criminal Justice, to underscore its identity as NACDL’s charitable arm. Other objectives are under discussion, including a proposal to streamline the organization’s governance processes. Says Reimer:

“As the constitutionally ordained officers charged with representing all accused persons, criminal defense lawyers are absolutely indispensable to the survival of democracy.”

He continues: “TCC Group’s work will continue to figure importantly in helping NACDL and the NACDL FCJ clarify their relationship, leverage resources, and maximize impact. In working with us, TCC brought a deep appreciation of our members’ passion for their work and a dedication to social justice.”