



Dear friends,

As I write this, our nation is in turmoil –and perhaps at a turning point–over racial injustice and police brutality, on top of the racial and other injustices accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many, I have felt outrage, disgust, and horror at the murders of so many unarmed black individuals by police and other individuals. And like many other white individuals and organizations, I have a new, more bedrock sense of the urgency of--and commitment to--helping to reduce the suffering of black people in this country.

While my domestic violence work is not directly focused on racial injustice, the issue intersects with domestic violence in numerous ways. For instance, the significant increases in domestic violence resulting from the pandemic are especially burdensome to [people of color](#). Middle and upper-middle class individuals, among whom people of color are underrepresented, have far greater access to representation in custody or domestic violence litigation than those with fewer financial and social resources. And it has been my personal experience that “white privilege” can be seen in some civil and family courts’ responses to abuse--i.e., when an alleged abuser is white and middle/upper-middle class, such courts may resist holding him accountable more than when the alleged abuser is black.

As the National Family Violence Law Center (NFVLC) goes forward, we commit to keeping a close eye on matters of racial injustice in both our workplace and our work in the world. And now, please read on, to learn about this exciting new endeavor.

Please bear with this content-filled message. Our website will launch soon, but we wanted our readers to have a good overview of the center now.

I am delighted to announce the launch of the **National Family Violence Law Center at the George Washington University Law School**. NFVLC’s mission is to bring together the domestic violence and child maltreatment fields in order to more powerfully inform and influence legal policy and judicial decision-making to better protect children subjected to adult or child victimization in their family (“family violence”). The center is the first organization in the nation to build an empirical foundation for these much-needed system reforms.

NFVLC will further its mission by procuring and deploying empirical research, articulating and advancing policy proposals, and engaging in selective litigation. We will also mobilize and support local and national advocates for victims, and amplify the public and professional discourse through media and communications outreach.

As the proud founder and director of the center, I am delighted to announce that esteemed colleagues, Professor and Clinical Dean Laurie Kohn; Professor Naomi Cahn; Professor Catherine J. Ross; Professor Mary Ellsberg, Director of the GW Global Women’s Institute; and Dr. Nicole Lang have all agreed to work with NFVLC. Collectively, they bring critical expertise in scholarship, policy development, research, and alliance-building to the center’s mission.

NFVLC will structure its work around three primary efforts:

1. Research, Scholarship, and Media

Initially the center’s efforts will build on my recently completed five-year empirical study, the results of which are reported in *Child Custody Outcomes in Cases Involving Abuse and Alienation Allegations*. (the “study”). [This study](#) is a rich mine of pioneering original empirical data which is urgently needed to inform critical “data-based” policy changes.

For instance, [the study](#) found that where a mother reported child sexual abuse by the father, and the father responded by claiming she is committing “parental alienation” (a highly controversial concept), courts only believed the abuse had occurred and protected the child 1 time out of 51 cases.

NFVLC will mine the study’s considerable additional data for further analyses of myriad topics, including the role of child welfare agencies and other things. The center will support state-based researchers who seek to analyze their own state’s data from the study to support local advocacy and system reform efforts. It also will commission additional research and reports using existing databases, such as the [database of children killed by a parent](#) involved in a family court proceeding.

In addition to continued empirical and qualitative research, NFVLC will host national conferences to bring together constituencies that rarely collaborate, including domestic violence and family law academics and professionals, as well as juvenile and child welfare law, and child maltreatment and domestic violence professionals.

2. State Family Violence Law Clearinghouse

As a result of the growing number of [child homicides by parents](#) involved in family court, as well as the unanimous adoption by the House of Representatives of [H.Con.Res.72 on Child Safety in the Family Courts](#), state lawmakers have begun to focus on the problems in family courts. There is currently no centralized or national entity to support local and regional legislative reform efforts; **the center will fill this gap**. NFVLC’s clearinghouse will support advocates and policymakers by providing expert research and analysis, offering best-practices templates for legislation, and working to coordinate diverse legislative efforts around the country so that each jurisdiction does not have to start from scratch.

3. Appellate Briefs in Impact Litigation

Building on our [significant litigation experience](#), the center will provide amicus briefs in critical cases in the Supreme Court, federal appellate courts, and occasionally in the highest state courts involving issues of importance for the domestic violence field. In particular, in partnership with selected law firms, we will provide the only existing pro bono resource to support parents who have fled abuse in another country but are sued for return of a child under the Hague Abduction Convention.

In closing, I first wish to recognize the generous support of GW Law, which is providing office space and a range of essential in-kind support for NFVLC’s operations.

Equally, I am deeply grateful to the founding donors who have funded the center’s launch and enabled NFVLC to begin its critical mission. Thanks to an extremely generous anchor pledge of \$150,000 over three years and additional donations of over \$25,000, we are launching with \$79,000 in the bank. This support is critical, as the center’s operating budget (director and other staff salaries, research efforts, and above-described work) is funded entirely through outside donations and grants.

NFVLC’s short-term goal is to double these gifts in the next year so that we can hire a policy advocate to staff the State Law Clearinghouse and organize our first conference. Thereafter, as we broaden our funding, we will expand and grow our capacities to further the essential work described above.

The center very much needs your continued support--professional, financial, and personal. Thank you for everything you have already done to make this launch possible. We look forward to working with you as NFVLC moves forward.

[Donate here](#)

Warm wishes,

Joan S. Meier
Professor of Clinical Law
George Washington University Law School