The Client: The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia (Legal Aid), D.C.’s oldest and largest general civil legal services organization, strives to make access to justice available for persons living in poverty in D.C. Legal Aid provides both direct services to individual clients in a variety of different areas and performs systemic advocacy on issues that have an impact beyond an individual client. The areas in which Legal Aid provides direct services include domestic violence/family, housing, public benefits, and consumer law. In their work related to systemic changes, Legal Aid often seeks structural solutions, for example, changes in law or regulatory schemes or reform of government or court practice.

The Problem: In recent months, the marijuana laws in D.C. have become more tolerant. However, federal laws prohibiting marijuana possession and use remain the same. This tension between federal and D.C. laws creates a unique challenge for public benefits programs that are federally subsidized, like public housing. Currently, D.C. Housing Authority (DCHA) can evict residents for marijuana use. Legal Aid asked the Community Justice Project to gather D.C. public housing resident opinions and to research practices in other cities regarding marijuana-related evictions of public housing residents with the goal of flagging possible policy reforms that DCHA might consider.

The Outcome: Through conversations with D.C. public housing residents and research of practices of public housing authorities in other cities, CJP students identified common themes and fashioned several policy options. CJP students presented these findings to the housing practice group at Legal Aid and compiled a report detailing their findings.