



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT:

Joel Diringer

Joel Diringer is a public health policy consultant who first worked with CRLA as a summer clerk before earning his J.D. at UC Davis. He returned to CRLA full-time in 1983, first as a staff attorney in our Santa Maria office and moving to San Luis Obispo when we opened our current office there. As he shares in this interview, he made significant contributions to rural health advocacy at CRLA and has continued to impact rural health policy statewide.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO JOIN CRLA?

My involvement with CRLA started in law school when Al Meyerhoff came and spoke to our law school class and was looking for summer clerks to work on the ag mechanization case. I was at UC Davis, which is the heart of ag mechanization. I worked two summers on the case and then came back to CRLA as an attorney in 1983 and worked on it some more.

The ag mechanization case got me into agricultural and farmworker issues in the state. It was a massive piece of litigation surrounding public policy. That was the kind of thing I did at CRLA as a young attorney. I argued a housing discrimination case in the CA Supreme Court within the first few years, then soon after sued the governor over family planning funding (and almost got CRLA defunded over it), and then I got to testify in Congress on farmworker health coverage. This was all as a young attorney.

I also found great mentors at CRLA. Al Meyerhoff, Ralph Abascal, and Tim McCarthy in the Salinas office—they were the lead attorneys on the ag mechanization case when I started working on it. And Marion Standish, who also worked on the ag mechanization case and went on to start the CRLA Foundation, The California Endowment, and Nourish California. They were all incredible mentors in so many ways.

WHAT ARE YOUR PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS FROM YOUR TIME AT CRLA?

Suing Governor [George Deukmejian] over his veto of two-thirds of state family planning funding. He said “well, teen birth is on the rise, so it’s obviously not working” and cut all this funding. It’s like saying arson is on the rise and cutting funding for fire departments.

We put together our case, we had individual plaintiffs, organizational plaintiffs, two pro bono attorneys, and the National Health Law Program. We sued in local Superior Court in San Luis Obispo.

We won in Superior Court, it was getting appealed to the Supreme Court, and the Legislature, in its first legislative enactment of 1990, reappropriated the money and the governor let it become law without his signature. Turned out if the legislature was in session it wasn’t a 30-day veto, it was a 30-day approval.

This case was a big deal in 1989. The LA Times ran nine editorials about it. It launched my career in health and health policy. But the day after we won, the Legal Services Corporation sent a team of investigators to investigate CRLA for allegedly violating the restriction on abortion litigation. [Executive Director] Jose [Padilla] will remember that for sure.

HOW HAS WORKING AT CRLA IMPACTED YOUR CAREER?

What CRLA did in a large sense was cement me in the community as an advocate. The work I started at CRLA with farmworkers and health coverage, that’s really lasted.

After the family planning funding case, I took a year off and got a masters in public health. I returned to my role as staff attorney in San Luis Obispo, and also led CRLA’s Health Task Force. We created the Rural Health Advocacy Institute as a joint project between CRLA, Inc. and the CRLA Foundation. There was a big report that I did in 1996, “Hurting in the Heartland,” that looked at healthcare access and healthcare disparities in the San Joaquin Valley. From there, once we got funding for the Rural Health Advocacy Institute, I got hired at what was just starting to be the California Endowment, and I couldn’t do both.

I’m working with UC Merced now on this farmworker health study and just got a grant from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to look at how Medi-Cal expansion could potentially help farmworkers. I also did a lot of work on the impact of COVID-19 on farmworkers, pre-vaccine, and then saw Jose [Padilla] on the vaccine committee Zoom calls, advocating for allocation of vaccines to farmworkers.

Now I get asked by younger people, “How can I be like you and work on policy issues?” and I say, “You can work in a legal aid office for 15 years, helping low-income people directly, hearing what’s going on and seeing how the system affects them.”

Fifteen years seeing clients every day really led me to understand what some of the policy barriers are that impact low-income people. Without that sort of grounding, it’s difficult to know how policy will actually help people or not.

WHAT CHALLENGES FACING RURAL CALIFORNIA DO YOU THINK CRLA COULD MOST IMPACT?

One of the biggest ones is the impact of climate change and developing climate resilience, because it's going to change the whole fabric of farmworker communities. The drought, the loss of water, the fallowing of fields, the shifting to more mechanization. It's sort of like the logging industry that fell apart in Northern California and we saw whole towns decimated. And that's besides all the other challenges [in rural communities] of being underfunded, under-resourced, ignored.

HOW DO YOU STAY CONNECTED WITH CRLA?

After the Tubbs fire in 2017, I went up and volunteered with the Santa Rosa office for a few days. The office had been closed because it had been smoked out, so I helped staff the CRLA table at the FEMA center.

I also still have regular conversations with CRLA alumni. I'm still doing work with the CRLA Foundation. We have a couple of bills in the legislature and we just got \$1.5 Million from the [CA State] Legislature to do a farmworker health study, which UC Merced is conducting.

Working on the same issues as I did when I was at CRLA, I work with a lot of the same people. For example, one of the lead attorneys on the ag mechanization case, Juan Aranga, and I worked together in the last year or two on a farmworker health coverage project in Monterey County.

The CRLA Alumni network is informal but remains very strong. I remember during the first phase of COVID I was on the phone with Noe Paramo at CRLA Foundation and he ran into Ricardo Córdova while out walking his dogs in Modesto. Ricardo is a judge for the Stanislaus County Superior Court, we clerked together one summer in law school. [Judge Córdova also worked at CRLA for 16 years.] So Ricardo and I had a nice chat.

Want to suggest a CRLA alum for a future Alumni Spotlight feature? Email us at development@crla.org.



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