

Partnering for Peace Through Community Mediation DC

By John Murph

Consider the following scenario: You started a business with a friend who then did not show up for work on a regular basis, leaving you feeling exhausted, disrespected, and taken for granted. You need the partnership to work out but don't want to ruin your friendship. How do you resolve this issue without going to court?

In the District of Columbia, residents have another option: Community Mediation DC (CMDC), a safe environment to settle conflicts at little to no cost. The key requirement? Dialogue.

"This is a national movement that offers collaborative and inclusive listening," says Monique Riviere, CMDC's executive director. "We listen to what the participants are saying about their conflict, whether it's two participants or up to 10, then we facilitate conversations among them."

CMDC considers itself a critical part of D.C.'s social justice system, helping residents resolve issues before they escalate and end up in litigation. "We save people money and time by preventing their conflicts from entering the courts," Riviere says.

Started in 2017, CMDC partners with organizations throughout the District of Columbia for referrals and outreach. It has an expansive team of certified mediators and conflict coaches, as well as more than 100 "ambassa-

dors" in the city that help promote its services to community organizations, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

Beyond issues involving roommate arrangements, coparenting plans, and neighborhood cooperation, CMDC also provides mediation for people reentering society after imprisonment and works with D.C. public schools to address student truancy.

" Oftentimes a student's parents are referred to us by the Office of the Attorney General so that we can help them come to a solution around improving their child's attendance," Riviere explains. "That helps parents avoid court and penalties if they are able to come to a resolution."

CMDC does not operate out of a brick-and-mortar office building but instead conducts its confidential mediations at neutral locations agreed upon by the parties, such as a library or community center, on a day convenient for everyone's schedules. "At the end of the mediation, people can opt to sign a non-binding agreement just so it is documented," Riviere says.

HIGH-IMPACT WORK

Along with individual donations and institutional funders, CMDC also relies on the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center to achieve its goals. When Riviere stepped into the role of interim executive director in mid-2025 after several years of volunteering, she noticed that her email inbox was filled with newsletters from the center.

CMDC's relationship with the Pro Bono Center began in 2017 when Riviere's predecessor, Caroline Cragin, reached out to the center after founding the organization. Cragin attended the center's Legal Clinic for Small Employers: Hiring and On-Boarding training to

help formalize CMDC's 501(c)3 nonprofit status.

"I was new to nonprofit leadership," Cragin recalls. "When I found the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center, [I discovered that] it was a wonderful resource of dedicated volunteers who were willing to put in the time and work. I just needed some additional guidance and some guardrails to make sure that we were on the right track." Cragin left CMDC as executive director in December 2023, but she remains active with the organization as a board member.

Supported by a staff of three nonattorneys and a roster of trained volunteer mediators, Riviere says that CMDC makes "high impact" with "low resources."

"We do not have legal resources within our organization, so we rely on pro bono attorneys to assist us with things like contract reviews," says Riviere. When Riviere needed another "legal set of eyes" on CMDC's employee handbook to ensure it was compliant, she sought guidance from the Pro Bono Center.

"The Pro Bono Center volunteer attorneys looked at our [human resources] policies and job descriptions; they helped me make some key updates to ensure that we were in compliance," Riviere says.

Valerie Hughes, special counsel at Covington & Burling LLP, was one of the volunteer attorneys who assisted Riviere. "I met with Monique and discussed Community Mediation DC's current hiring practices and employee benefit plans using an assessment tool prepared by Covington lawyers in our employment and employee benefits practice groups," Hughes says. "The assessment tool describes common legal issues that small employers in the D.C. area may face."

“I very much enjoyed having the chance to meet Monique and discuss Community Mediation DC and its mission of providing free mediation services to help community members resolve conflicts,” adds Hughes.

At another Pro Bono Center legal clinic for nonprofits, Riviere sought review of a vendor contract to ensure that signing it wouldn’t put CMDC at risk. “They are my saviors,” says Riviere about the Pro Bono Center and its volunteers. “I now have a checklist that I can refer to.”

“Because we have very limited capacity, we are really focused on our mission. Every dollar that we get counts. So, being able to take advantage of [the nonprofit legal clinics] gives me the resources that I need [for] the near future, like mapping out our strategic plan and setting our priorities for the next few months,” Riviere continues.

Lauren Paley, associate manager of nonprofit and small business legal assistance programs at the Pro Bono Center, says it is the center’s honor to have served CMDC’s legal needs for the past eight years. “They’re providing essential services to individuals who are dealing with all sorts of conflicts,” Paley says. “Actually, it’s very close to the work we do because oftentimes they’re working with individuals who, if they can’t resolve something early on, might need to come to our colleagues here at the Pro Bono Center to find an attorney to go to court.”

A PERSONAL CALLING

Before arriving at CMDC, Riviere was chief program officer at Byte Back, Inc., a small local organization that had no human resources department. When conflicts erupted in the office, Riviere felt it was her responsibility to resolve them.

She first sought help from several professional coaches, who offered some advice, and later learned about community mediation organizations. But at the time, the closest one was in Maryland.

Both employees involved in one of the conflicts Riviere was trying to resolve were Maryland residents. “I would like to say that we had a happy ending where they both showed up for the mediation, but unfortunately one did not,” Riviere says. “But it was from that



Monique Riviere (left) and Caroline Cragin of Community Mediation DC have a strong relationship with the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center. Jati Lindsay Photography

experience that I learned about community mediation and that it was free, voluntary, and confidential. I immediately started looking to see how I could be a mediator because I consider myself a peace builder. I know people are not always going to agree, but I think conversation is vital.”

Riviere also cites her experience of being bullied as a kid as part of her inspiration to explore mediation work. “I grew up feeling not heard or understood a lot,” she says. “This kind of work has allowed me to develop skills to articulate what’s important to me.”

A few years after working at Byte Back, Riviere served as project manager at Neighborhood Legal Services Program. There, she encountered Cragin, who had just launched CMDC. Riviere found her ideal workplace at CMDC, volunteering with the organization for six years.

When Cragin stepped down as executive director, Riviere served on the search committee to

find a suitable replacement, but ended up assuming the role.

As Riviere continues to lead CMDC, she says she intends to lean on the Pro Bono Center for guidance. “I think I will be checking with the nonprofit legal clinics every year or [every] two years as CMDC matures,” she says.

The Pro Bono Center’s Paley says that in working with an attorney, organizations often realize that “being healthy legally means doing some maintenance,” such as attending legal clinics and having a lawyer look over their documents.

“We’re just excited to see them thrive in the community and continue to grow during a time when there are even more conflicts and more need for mediation,” Paley says. 

Reach D.C. Bar staff writer John Murph at jmurph@dcb.org.