

Candidate Statement

My name is Shelby Leighton, and I have had the pleasure of serving on the NELA Board since July 2023. In my short time on the Board, I have focused on deepening my understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing NELA. But I'm just getting started. If elected, I would be ready to build on what I've learned this year to dive into the work of continuing to build a strong and vibrant organization.

I live in Maine, and I work in the Access to Justice Project at Public Justice, where I litigate high-impact cases with the goal of breaking down systemic barriers that prevent people whose rights are violated from accessing the courts and holding corporations accountable.

Throughout my career, I have focused both my professional and volunteer work on fighting for workers. I began my career as a Supreme Court Assistance Project fellow at Public Citizen, where I helped civil rights plaintiffs and workers preserve important court of appeals victories, and as a fellow at Cohen Milstein in Washington, DC, where I worked on civil rights and employment class actions. After moving to my home state of Maine, I joined a workers' rights firm there, where I represented workers in discrimination and wage and hour cases for more than three years. I also became involved in my local NELA affiliate and began volunteering at the Southern Maine Workers' Center, eventually joining its board.

At Public Justice, I have continued to represent workers, particularly low-wage workers, and I use impact litigation and advocacy to address barriers that prevent workers from having their day in court, including forced arbitration. My work on forced arbitration has allowed me to work closely with NELA—including representing NELA in filing two amicus briefs on the scope of the Ending Forced Arbitration in Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Act—as well as groups and attorneys practicing in other areas like consumer law, personal injury, and civil rights.

In my work, I see how the same pernicious and persistent barriers that keep workers from obtaining justice also affect consumers, tenants, incarcerated people, and others injured by corporations. If elected to continue serving on NELA's Board, I would be excited to continue to strengthen NELA's connections to attorneys working outside of employment law to collaborate on advocacy around existing priorities like ending forced arbitration, ending damages caps, and ensuring a fair and independent judiciary, as well as new areas where NELA has not been traditionally involved. I envision NELA attorneys collaborating with immigrant rights attorneys to bring wage and hour claims against immigrant detention centers, or with housing attorneys to fight the use of criminal background checks in housing and employment decisions. And I would love to see NELA collaborate with these organizations for advocacy days, seminars, or amicus briefs.

One reason that I'm particularly excited by the prospect of serving on the NELA Board is that I have found NELA to be a welcoming professional "home" for me, and I would like to help make sure that NELA feels that way for every attorney. I have been impressed by how seriously NELA has taken its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, which I can tell has been intentionally incorporated at every level of the organization's work. That said, there is more work to do to make NELA and the plaintiffs' bar an equitable and inclusive place for everyone, and I would love the opportunity to dig into that hard work on the NELA Board.

I also have already been able to contribute my substantial nonprofit leadership experience to the Board. In my years as a board member at the Southern Maine Workers' Center, I have participated in helping the organization weather significant changes, including a growing budget, changes in leadership and organizational structure, and new strategic directions. Those experiences have taught me how to navigate

the challenges and opportunities of a member-led organization and the importance of taking time to be intentional about aligning the day-to-day structure and work of the organization with its overall mission. While NELA is of course a larger organization with more members, more resources, and a larger budget, I have been able to transfer lessons learned from my experience at the Workers' Center to my role as a NELA Board member, particularly as the organization looks at strategic planning for the future.

In short, I would be honored to continue to serve this hardworking, thoughtful, smart, and fun community of attorneys on the NELA Board.