2017 ANNUAL REPORT

AMPLIFYING VOICES

PHILADELPHIA LEGAL ASSISTANCE
DEAR FRIENDS,

PLA has a longstanding reputation as a primary provider of legal services to Philadelphians living in poverty, but we know that at our core our purpose is to ensure that our clients are heard. Too often low income people around the country are denied justice in court proceedings, due to confusing processes and the implicit biases ingrained into the legal system. We’ve seen how having an advocate at their side who can identify the issue, frame the legal argument and advocate for a fair resolution can in turn empower a client to better understand the system and self-advocate moving forward. By listening to the stories and working with each client to develop an advocacy plan that they are comfortable with, they are a partner in the work necessary to regain stability in their lives and families.

At PLA, we are honored to amplify the voices of so many to help them overcome legal obstacles and lead healthy, stable and safe lives. Here we retell a few of our clients’ stories involving unjust situations or unfair treatment that because of the assistance of a PLA advocate, have a happy ending.

Serving in this role would not be possible without your support. I encourage you to read on and be inspired by what we you have helped us achieve for the benefit of others.

ANITA SANTOS-SINGH | Executive Director
PHILADELPHIA LEGAL ASSISTANCE
Many of the over 900 people who reach her or other members of the intake unit do so after a relentless phone campaign across agencies to find someone who will listen. Natashia strives to be the first person to really listen to their story, knowing that even if there is no legal solution to the problem that is presented, the desperation of the situation warrants action, creative thinking, or persistence in order to bring relief to the caller.

Mr. Daulton* reached Natashia after a twelve-year-old clerical error at the DMV continued to affect his everyday life. Mr. Daulton’s drivers’ license had been revoked by PennDot as a result of an unpaid judgement from an old motor vehicle accident. The problem, Mr. Daulton explained to Natashia, was although he had been in an accident and had been involved in a court action, he had won that case and had in fact won a monetary award. Mr. Daulton had the facts correct and knew that the revocation of his license was unjust and wrong, yet he could not find anyone who would listen or correct the answer. He could not pay off a judgement to get his license back, even if his finances would allow it, because no such judgement actually existed.

Natashia obtained the court record which supported Mr. Daulton’s claim and sent it to Penndot, but never received a response. She then sent it again and again, each time finding that it was either lost or filed away without action. Numerous phone calls followed numerous letters, and after several retellings of his story to Penndot representatives, Natasha made sure Mr. Daulton’s story was finally heard by pressing to speak with a Supervisor. Mr. Daulton’s license was reinstated and had all fines and costs waived.

During this same period Natasha assisted Mrs. Emerson, an 87-year old woman on a fixed income, who had received repeat notices from the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) assessing fines for litter on her property and an overgrown lawn. Her children, who had helped her in the past, were in no condition to do so now. Two were gravely ill and the others lived out of state. Mrs. Emerson had tried to explain her situation to L&I but the fines kept increasing and while pressure to pay mounted. She finally found PLA and Natashia, who was able to intervene with L&I to ensure that Mrs. Emerson’s story was heard. Natashia negotiated with various L&I employees to have the violations dropped and the accumulated fines reduced to a manageable level. With this financial burden lifted, Mrs. Emerson can now focus on finding assistance to make her home safe and a respected part of her community.

What Natasha enjoys most about her job is the variety and surprise that each new walk-in and each phone call brings. As an intake paralegal, she receives referrals from city agencies, the courts, other non-profit organizations, and former clients.

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*All client names have been changed.
Health Center staff understand that the various socio-legal problems that weigh on the minds of the patients who seek their care cause additional stress and create obstacles in leading healthy lives. Estate planning, medical debt collections, lead poisoning and abatement, medical reimbursement, and domestic violence issues create toxic stress in lives of our clients, and often exacerbate illness and prevent recoveries—ultimately reducing patient quality of life and lessening their chance of recovery.

Many of the patients at the Health Centers have never sought out legal aid in the past, but benefit from multiple cases for the duration of our services. Ms. Macon, a home health aid, was referred by medical staff because her doctors feared that the strenuous nature of her work was leading to steady deterioration of several chronic conditions. Ms. Macon understood that her health is constantly declining but feels trapped by the fear that if she stops working she will be unable to meet the financial needs of her family. Still, Ms. Macon agreed to meet with Cynthia who explained that she does have a strong case for disability benefits, and that although it can take months for these benefits to be processed with even the clearest need, there are food stamps and other benefits to help her maintain stability without income from working.

Cynthia’s used her expertise to communicate with the doctors at Health Center #3 about which of Ms. Macon’s medical conditions qualified her for disability, then assisted in gathering information and records that the application requires. Ms. Macon utilized the MLCP in coordinating applications for other benefits during the long wait for disability. When she fell behind on her mortgage, the MLCP connected her to PLA’s Save Your Home Philly Hotline so she could enter an agreement that would make it easier for her to pay off her debts while staying in her home. This type of procedural advocacy takes time and stamina that is particularly undue for Ms. Macon as she focused on recovering her health. By sharing her story with a legal advocate, who helped her bridge the communication gap with the medical staff, Ms. Macon found a streamlined path to getting the critical social supports she needs. Cynthia’s intervention meant that Ms. Macon did not need to do it alone; and allowed her to focus on stabilizing her medical condition and preserving her family and her home.

Communication is at the heart of Cynthia’s job. As an attorney at the Medical Legal Community Partnership (MLCP), Cynthia coordinates on a daily basis with doctors and nurses at Health Centers #3 and #4, the volunteer attorneys from Dechert, LLP and Pepper Hamilton, LLP, law students from area law schools, other PLA lawyers and paralegals, and patients of the Health Centers.
In another case, Mrs. Costa presented every parent’s nightmare to Emilia. Her child had been abducted by the father and taken to a country that is not a signatory to the Hague Convention of International Custody of Children. This meant that even though Mrs. Costa had a custody order and knew where her child was, she was unable to find any way to reunite with her child who was a world away. Emilia, however, knew who to contact and knew what legal steps to take. Emilia contacted law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad and notified them of the situation. When the father re-entered the country, Emilia was alerted to his return and a warrant for the father was issued that required him to produce the child. Emilia rushed to Court and secured a custody order to facilitate the transfer of the child to Mrs. Costa. Government officials in the U.S. and abroad worked to obtain the documentation required to secure the release of the child, who was then finally brought to the American Embassy and flown home to be reunited with his mother. Emilia’s careful and persistent telling of Ms. Costa’s story resulted in a welcome homecoming for a small child and a loving mother.

Like Cynthia at the MCLP, Emilia, Ashley and James work in a unit whose practice depends upon coordination and collaboration between several agencies. Their family law practice relies on federal funding from the Department of Justice to reconnect and stabilize families, keeping them safe from harmful and often life-threatening domestic violence, sexual abuse, and abduction.

The incredible volume of those in danger often surpasses the capacity of our legal advocates but coordination of services with law students through the Custody and Support Assistance Clinic and the Drexel Civil Litigation Field Clinic helps the family law team’s ability to expand survivors’ access to representation. Further creative partnerships with the Family Law section of the Philadelphia Bar Association and Women Against Abuse create new opportunities to assist the thousands of unrepresented family law litigants through the joint operation of the Family Court Help Center. This allows Emilia and Ashley to focus on representing those least able to articulate the danger they are facing at home or to overcome overwhelming odds. Stressing holistic, trauma-informed service, the family law team helps survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence find answers to problems that have seemed insurmountable and intractable.

For years, Ms. Tracy had tried to have her voice heard by representing herself in the Family Court System. Despite her constant appeal to the courts for help, Ms. Tracy did not know the whereabouts of her eight-year-old son and had not seen or spoken to him for over two years because the child’s father routinely violated custody orders. Ms. Tracy kept at it but found no relief in the courts. When Ms. Tracy met James, that all changed. James quickly located the child living in another state and coordinated weekly phone contact for Ms. Tracy and her son, as well as a visit over Christmas while they waited for an outcome from their court hearing. After several months and several hearings, James successfully advocated on Ms. Tracy’s behalf with the court and won her sole legal and physical custody of her son. Ms. Tracy and her son are now together, reconnecting and rebuilding their relationship. Ms. Tracy now has not only a court order, but she also has an attorney ready and able to enforce it.

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The Low Income Tax Clinic (LITC), which is funded in part by the Internal Revenue Service, allows PLA to help the most disenfranchised taxpayers – including citizens and recent immigrants alike with language barriers, people whose family structures and paper trails don’t conform to IRS expectations, and those who have been taken advantage of by identity thieves, unscrupulous tax preparers and employers who misclassify them as independent contractors – navigate the IRS process.

Ms. Balawa had been courageous enough to take her two children and leave her abusive husband. However, he continued to claim the children on his tax return even though he provided no support for them and they no longer lived with him. This caused the IRS to audit her returns for two years and demand that she repay the refunds that she had received, including the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Additional Child Tax Credit. She was still new to the English language, and she did not understand the notices that the IRS was sending to her. And, because she did not have a lease where she was living and hadn’t updated the children’s addresses with the school district, she didn’t have the paper records that the IRS auditors require to allow dependency claims.

The IRS took her 2016 refund to repay one of the years, but luckily she came to the LITC when there was still enough time to challenge the IRS in U.S. Tax Court for the other year. Lazlo helped her file a petition in U.S. Tax Court, helped her gather other evidence, and went with her, her children, and another family member to meet with the IRS legal office so that she could explain the situation face-to-face.

After that meeting, and, of course, some additional paperwork and waiting, the IRS agreed that she was the one who was entitled to claim her children for the years that her husband had also claimed them and that she did not owe anything. The IRS gave her back the money they had taken from her 2016 refund, and she was able to get her refund for 2017 without that being taken, too.
Dave’s work in the Public Benefits Unit represents a life-long commitment that allows him to help people escape or prevent homelessness, hunger, or even death. He has seen that when sudden life changes occur, anyone can find themselves needing access to life-saving basic needs such as income, food, and medical care.

A loss of employment, an escape from domestic violence, or a sudden health crisis are often the point at which a life on track spins off and derails. Working with students in the Employment Advocacy Project from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Temple University Beasley School of Law, and Kline School of Law at Drexel University, together with the Food Stamp Clinic with the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Dave and his co-worker, Julia, represent numbers that they and their small staff could never accommodate on their own.

Dave saw Ms. Sutter at a point in her life when her health was rapidly deteriorating. She had been on Social Security disability, but like many people, resisted the stigmatized label of disabled and therefore returned to work where she earned more than the maximum allowed by the Social Security Administration. As a result she lost her benefits. While Ms. Sutter managed to stay afloat for a period of time, her disability began to catch up with her and her ability to work declined. She worried that the process to obtain disability would be very long and could see no way to survive while she waited. Dave was able to provide Ms. Sutter an option by connecting her with a special program called Expedited Reissuance, where benefits could be restored temporarily pending a medical review.

Dave’s conducted numerous phone calls to Social Security, moving the process along and ensuring that all documents were sent, received, and recorded, which allowed Ms. Sutter to receive the income she required to survive. Ms. Sutter’s story was happier than it might have been because Dave is not only experienced in the law of public benefits but a persistent advocate whose attention to detail ensures a positive outcome for his clients.

At the start of 2017, many displaced workers who were trying to keep their homes and feed their families were finding their ability to obtain or maintain Unemployment Compensation compromised. Compromised not because of the facts of their individual cases or due to any lack of determination to tell their stories, but due to a devastating level of layoffs at the Department of Labor and Industry that ground the system to a halt. Nearly thirty-five percent of the staff that handled unemployment compensation matters were gone and a system which had been difficult to access at the best of times was now nearly impossible to access throughout the state. We could never begin to tell the stories of all the claimants affected and the hardships they faced one person at a time. However, PLA attorney, Julia, working with other advocates assembled a plan of action to respond to this crisis. Handouts and educational materials were prepared and distributed throughout the state. Referrals to other legal resources throughout the state were made. Many of the questions that claimants’ might have were answered through Tip Sheets, produced in English and Spanish and the problems that claimants had were tracked through an online complaint system designed to track their experiences with the Service Centers. We were able to assist the Individuals responding to the online survey with information, representation or referral and we were able to share their stories with the media and others to raise awareness of the impact of the layoffs.
Ginny, a passionate advocate for these workers, faces extensive obstacles in connecting with clients not only because of the isolation of the agricultural workers and the language barriers, but also because much of the population is only in Pennsylvania for a short growing season and is then gone.

Mr. Perez was such a worker. When he and Ginny met, he had not been paid all his wages, had been wrongfully terminated from his job and subsequently evicted from his employer-provided housing. To make matters worse, his employer misclassified him as self-employed to the IRS, limiting or completely eliminating his ability to receive unemployment compensation. Mr. Perez had, of course, spoken with his employer and attempted to resolve these various issues, but his lack of power in this situation was telling and he was unfairly dismissed. Once he met with Ginny, however, the employer was no longer able to ignore his voice and as a result of a series of intense negotiations he was able to obtain full back wages and have his misclassification as an independent contractor corrected. Mr. Perez was able to return to his family with the income he had actually earned and the ability to collect unemployment compensation while he continued to search for a new job and new employer.
Irwin is proud that his unit, the Consumer Housing Unit, is an integral part of the comprehensive citywide effort to save homes from mortgage and property tax foreclosure.

By operating the Save Your Home Philly Hotline, which provides advice and referrals to thousands of people each year, and providing extended representation to homeowners in foreclosure cases, in bankruptcy court, and at the appellate level, he and his co-workers help keep the rate of low-income homeownership in Philadelphia one of the highest in major cities in the country. PLA and Irwin have played an important part in devising a Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program, a major component in a city wide effort to guard against displacement and gentrification in low income areas. The unit’s continued systemic advocacy to protect the rights of low-income consumers in Philadelphia helps to ensure that the future of low-income homeownership in Philadelphia remains something the city may be proud of for generations to come. This work is often frustrating as language barriers, illness, age and increasing poverty make such homeowners the victims of predatory or dishonest lenders or real estate speculators seeking to profit from their unfortunate situation.

When Mrs. Morris, a disabled widow and mother with limited English proficiency, on a limited fixed income, first saw Irwin, a judgment in mortgage foreclosure had been entered against her. She had earlier refused to accept a loan modification agreement that from the lender was unaffordable and would have insured the loss of her home had she accepted it. Her house was scheduled for sheriff sale and, absent representation and immediate action, Mrs Morris and her child would lose their home, and because of their low income, would have had no place to live but the street.

A review of the mortgage documents revealed the loan to be predatory with illegally high interest. Irwin promptly prepared and filed a petition that resulted in the default Judgment being opened so that Mrs. Morris could defend against the foreclosure and raise counterclaims for usury and for violation of other consumer protection statutes. Irwin was ultimately able to eliminate the entire balance of Mrs. Morris’s mortgage and to obtain attorney fees for PLA. With an advocate speaking for her, Mrs. Morris was able to enforce her right to be free from unfair and usurious lending practices and Mrs. Morris was able to permanently preserve for herself and her child an affordable and safe home.

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FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES
for Year Ending December 31, 2017

SUPPORT AND REVENUE

Grants and Contracts $4,411,512
Contributions $34,803
Program Income $40,797
Interest $325
Net Assets Released from Restrictions -
Total Support and Revenue $4,487,437

EXPENSE

Program Services $3,841,099
Management and General $493,805
Fundraising $29,420
Total Expense $4,364,324

Change in Net Assets $123,133
Net Assets – Beginning of Year $496,521
Net Assets – End of Year $619,634

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