

2020 ANNUAL REPORT

# INNOVATIVE JUSTICE

ENSURING ACCESS TO LEGAL AID DURING CRISIS



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Enforcing and protecting the rights of individuals and families by providing accessible, creative and high quality legal assistance and working collaboratively for systemic change.

MISSION

# DEAR FRIENDS



## Message from the Executive Director

This past year has shone a spotlight on what we have known to be true since our inception in 1996: that civil legal aid is a life-sustaining resource to low-income communities in Philadelphia. Unanticipated challenges interrupted all of our lives when we closed our office on March 17, 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our dedicated staff worked tirelessly to transition to remote work and make sure that our clients continued receiving the timely, high-quality support they needed. While our office doors may have closed, our work never ceased.

While communities faced loss of income, barriers to information, and threats to their safety, PLA stepped up to ensure that low-income Philadelphians continued to have access to critical legal aid during crisis. We were able to do this thanks to community. Thanks to adaptability. Thanks to perseverance. And thanks to collaboration.

PLA ramped up our outreach efforts, collaborating with legislators, community organizations, and The School District of Philadelphia to make sure people knew their rights and understood how they could get

legal and financial support. We started an unemployment compensation hotline to assist the thousands of individuals who now found themselves, many for the first time, navigating the complex unemployment system to receive benefits. We continued to advocate for the thousands of domestic violence survivors that found themselves unable to leave their abusers during lockdown. And we have been an integral partner in Philadelphia's Eviction Diversion Program, ensuring that no one lost their home during a global pandemic.

This annual report reflects on 2020 by sharing how PLA worked tirelessly to create innovative solutions to overcome the challenges brought on by the global pandemic. And while many things changed last year, one thing has not: your support. We could not have continued to ensure access to legal aid during this crisis without you. Thank you to all of our funders, donors, staff, volunteers, and community partners for supporting our critical efforts to enforce and protect the rights of Philadelphia's low-income population. We look forward to continuing this work with you as we transition into the new year with more resilience, empathy, and determination than ever.

**ANITA SANTOS-SINGH**  
Executive Director

# PROGRAM



## GENERAL INTAKE UNIT

The General Intake Unit supports people who face legal issues outside of our established priority areas. The General Intake Unit addresses a wide variety of life issues by coming up with creative legal solutions, whether the call is about bankruptcy, debt collection, securing a birth certificate, changing one's name, or raising an estate.

## FAMILY LAW UNIT

The Family Law Unit supports survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in securing protection from abuse orders and providing service in child custody, child support, and divorce. Legal support is critical for survivors seeking independence and freedom from abuse, and helps ensure that survivors can receive the support and trauma-informed care they need to build healthy, happy, and independent lives.

## CONSUMER HOUSING UNIT

The Consumer Housing Unit strives to prevent foreclosures for low-income homeowners, fight against predatory lending, and assist families in preserving the integrity of their homes. This year, we expanded our existing role as operators of Philadelphia's Save Your Home Philly Hotline, which has helped Philadelphians avoid mortgage foreclosure since 2008. In addition to its existing mortgage and tax foreclosure work, the hotline now plays an integral role in rental assistance programs and the Eviction Diversion Program that has been hailed as a national model.

## MEDICAL-LEGAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

The Medical-Legal Community Partnership integrates attorneys directly into community health centers in order to alleviate legal barriers to health for patients who otherwise would not have sought out legal aid services. The Medical-Legal Community Partnership, now in eight sites across the city, helps ensure patients' access to medical care, nutritious food, stable housing, and safety at home. Through our partnerships with Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) programs, our advocates also have the unique opportunity to act as harm reductionists by addressing previously unmet legal needs for patients suffering from substance use disorder.



# OVERVIEW

## TAXPAYER SUPPORT CLINIC

The Taxpayer Support Clinic supports individuals navigating complex and confusing federal income tax challenges, from IRS audits to identity theft, delayed stimulus payments, worker misclassification, and struggles with debt. This past year, the Taxpayer Support Clinic helped many individuals who hadn't previously interacted with the IRS receive the stimulus payments they were owed.

## PENNSYLVANIA FARMWORKER PROJECT

The Pennsylvania Farmworker Project worked to continue protecting the rights of agricultural workers across the state throughout the pandemic, despite an end to in-person outreach. Through increased virtual outreach and collaboration with community partners, PFP worked tirelessly this past year to ensure that struggling farmworkers knew their rights and could access legal support to fight against wage theft, unsafe working conditions, substandard housing, and workplace discrimination and harassment.



## UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION UNIT

This past year, the Unemployment Compensation Unit doubled in size to support the millions of workers who found themselves unemployed as a result of the pandemic. The UC Unit helped workers across the state navigate new government programs, launched an application hotline with 100 volunteers to help workers file for unemployment compensation, and advocated for benefits on behalf of over 1,000 workers.



From the start of the pandemic-induced financial crisis, calls came flooding into our office every day from community members with similar concerns:

**I lost my job.**



**I haven't gotten my unemployment check yet.**



AND THEN

**I can't pay rent this month.**

**How am I going to pay my mortgage?**



People who had never missed a rent or mortgage payment were suddenly thrust into housing insecurity. People who were already struggling to make ends meet found it even harder to manage household expenses like food and medical payments.

**FOUR PLA HOTLINES PROVIDED A LIFELINE**



GENERAL INTAKE HOTLINE



SAVE YOUR HOME PHILLY HOTLINE



FAMILY LAW HOTLINE



UNEMPLOYMENT APPLICATION SERVICE

Without pausing intake or operations, we immediately adapted our service-delivery model to accommodate remote work overnight. This adaptation included expanding all three of our live hotlines and creating a new, emergency line to serve clients four days a week. The advocates staffing our hotlines assisted with legal issues, including unemployment, child custody, protection from abuse, rental and mortgage assistance, and more..

**"The switch from an in-person paralegal-client relationship to one that takes place solely over the phone was never going to be easy, but it was deeply necessary and allowed us to continue to provide important and lifesaving legal assistance to Philadelphians during a time of crisis."**

- LINA, GENERAL INTAKE PARALEGAL

Our hotline staff also demonstrated agility and responsiveness to emerging needs by supporting several new relief programs designed to expand unemployment compensation or help homeowners and tenants preserve their housing during the pandemic. Our Save Your Home Philly Hotline entered the landlord-tenant space for the first time in PLA's history, and was the only live hotline providing assistance with Philadelphia's rental assistance program. Months later, we adapted again to act as navigators for the Eviction Diversion Program.

**"I'm very grateful to be on this hotline because we've been able to help so many people. I know that challenges will continue but we have so many people who are ready to face those challenges head on."**

- MADELINE, SENIOR PARALEGAL FOR THE SAVE YOUR HOME PHILLY HOTLINE

While the pandemic fundamentally changed how the world operated, it did not occur in a vacuum. Clients called our hotlines with legal issues that began before COVID-19 and that had been further exacerbated by the pandemic. While the courts had closed for in-person hearings, the Family Law Unit still had clients with legal needs that warranted immediate attention. Protection from abuse and custody cases involve anxiety-inducing legal processes to navigate. To have the financial and social pressures caused by COVID-19 added on to this can make it unbearable. By connecting over the hotline, our staff were able to offer clients a listening ear, a strategy to address their legal needs, and a sense of peace knowing that they were not alone.

**“During the pandemic the hotline was pivotal in ensuring the community had updates regarding family court. Families were able to access the courts and get the protection and help that they needed by calling the hotline. The hotline acted as a bridge between the family court and Philadelphians during the pandemic.”**

- CAROLINE,  
PARALEGAL IN THE FAMILY LAW UNIT



## CHALLENGE

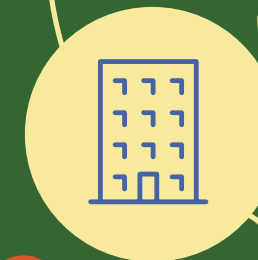
# LOSS OF INCOME

PLA worked on several fronts to maximize access to resources for Philadelphians impacted by the pandemic.

**UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION UNIT:** In 2020, the unemployment rate reached 14.8%—the highest rate since 1948. The Unemployment Compensation Unit quickly doubled in size to handle the 1,624 cases brought on by pandemic-related layoffs, ensuring that individuals across Philadelphia got, on average, the \$40,000 in benefits that they were eligible for.

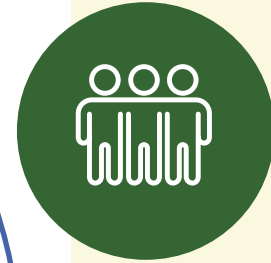
**TAXPAYER SUPPORT CLINIC:** The pandemic created major delays in IRS services, leaving many individuals without the economic impact payments and 2019 tax returns they were owed. Our Taxpayer Support Clinic (TSC) helped hundreds of people navigate barriers, such as identity theft, to receive money that was rightfully theirs. When the IRS withheld stimulus payments from our clients, TSC filed a lawsuit against them for misinterpreting the CARES Act. We successfully settled this case, ensuring our clients received the stimulus payments which they initially missed out on and would not otherwise have been able to get.

**CONSUMER HOUSING UNIT:** Loss of income impacted thousands of Philadelphians' ability to pay their rent and mortgage, leading to a looming eviction and foreclosure crisis. By taking a leading role in Philadelphia's Eviction Diversion and Rental Assistance Programs, the Save Your Home Philly Hotline and Consumer Housing Unit (CHU) have helped thousands of Philadelphians avoid eviction. Among Philadelphia homeowners, CHU helped hundreds of clients access mortgage assistance through the Pandemic Mortgage Assistance Program (PMAP), ensuring that their loss of income did not result in the loss of their home.



**UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION UNIT:** This year's inflated unemployment left the state unemployment website crashing with phone calls unanswered, leaving people feeling helpless and unable to receive their benefits. By setting up the Unemployment Application Service, a live hotline staffed by over one hundred volunteers, PLA worked to ensure that everyone—including non-English speakers, folks with intellectual disabilities, and those without access to internet—could get the assistance they needed. PLA created documents, Facebook lives, and resource pages that allowed individuals, legislators, and other community organizations to stay informed of constantly-changing UC updates.

**CONSUMER HOUSING UNIT:** The Save Your Home Philly Hotline, operated by PLA, was the only line taking live calls from tenants or homeowners at the beginning of the pandemic. Serving as the first point of contact for Philadelphians who needed a sympathetic ear and answers to their questions, CHU advocates stepped up as navigators to help people take advantage of the various iterations of rental assistance programs as they became available. The Hotline helped thousands of tenants access rental assistance payments and avoid the trauma of eviction. PLA also partnered with the Philadelphia Unemployment Project to contact thousands of individuals to ensure that they could access assistance through the Pandemic Mortgage Assistance Program (PMAP), the homeowner assistance program created by the State of Pennsylvania to provide grants to homeowners having difficulty paying their mortgage due to loss of employment related to COVID-19. When clients were denied PMAP funds, PLA advocates marshalled creative arguments on appeal to the agency distributing the funds, successfully obtaining assistance for many clients and setting a precedent for similar programs in the future. Additionally, CHU partnered with 20 community organizations to share information about housing resources during the pandemic, including the School District of Philadelphia, Philabundance, Share Food Program, SEAMAAC, and the National Health Corps. These collaborative efforts included direct mailings to at-risk Philadelphians, neighborhood canvassing, supermarket and emergency food distribution outreach, and virtual programming.

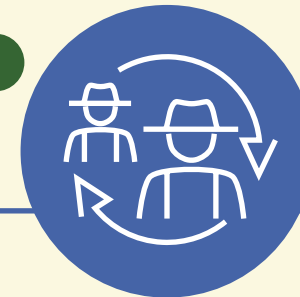


**FAMILY LAW UNIT:** Court delays, inaccessibility, and a lack of information threatened our vulnerable clients, most of whom are survivors of family violence, when Family Court closed in March 2020. From advocating directly with the courts to creating templates for self-represented litigants, FLU implemented creative solutions to ensure that low-income families were able to access justice through the court system. When the Family Court's Help Center closed at the start of the pandemic, FLU worked to fill that gap by engaging Philadelphia VIP, an agency that recruits, trains, and supports volunteer attorneys. With the help of VIP, FLU was able to create a program providing free, 30-minute phone consultations to families who needed help drafting custody pleadings. FLU also collaborated with a coalition of domestic violence organizations in Philadelphia to create a shared resource document to ensure the greatest numbers of survivors had access to critical information.

**PENNSYLVANIA FARMWORKER PROJECT:** Before the pandemic hit, PFP regularly visited workers living in close quarters in their employer-provided housing. Because of PFP's location in Philadelphia, a densely populated urban area where the disease was spreading fast, we made the difficult decision to halt these trips. We quickly pivoted to outreach via social media, hosting virtual know-your-rights presentations and connecting with new partners, including service providers in counties that we do not visit often, broadening our outreach to areas of Western Pennsylvania where we hadn't formerly engaged. Still, we knew there were isolated workers on the ground—particularly the older and less tech-savvy individuals—who we might not reach that way. To address this problem, we strengthened our partnerships with rural non-profits and community groups to collaborate on information-sharing and referrals.

**MEDICAL-LEGAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP:** The MLCP aims to promote health equity by finding civil legal solutions to the social, economic, and environmental factors contributing to toxic stress and poor health. When the pandemic forced our staff out of our partner health centers, our advocates adjusted by leaning into telework, including daily patient case review with our health partners. Our staff also increased the frequency of check-ins with existing patients and found creative ways to encourage new patient referrals, like explainer videos and weekly resource guides. These efforts allowed our MLCP to serve as an essential lifeline for patients with unmet legal needs stemming from the social and economic fallout of pandemic, such as accessing social security and unemployment benefits. In the midst of the pandemic, Health Partners Plans, a non-profit health maintenance organization which provides Medicaid, Medicare and Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP) to central and southeastern Pennsylvania residents, funded a new MLCP site at Maria de los Santos Health Center making it possible for us to extend access to the Latinx community.

**TAXPAYER SUPPORT CLINIC:** When stimulus payments became available, it was virtually impossible for taxpayers to contact the IRS by phone, leaving taxpayers confused and frustrated. The TSC hosted Facebook lives and shared educational materials to ensure people knew their eligibility. Through intentional outreach to at-risk populations, we made sure that everyone—such as people experiencing homelessness, non-English speakers, and older retired folks—knew how to receive their payments.



**MEDICAL-LEGAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP:** In 2020, 1,214 Philadelphians died from drug overdoses. The pandemic only exacerbated the existing opioid crisis, with fatal overdoses suffered by Black Philadelphians spiking by more than 50%. The MLCP fosters the holistic health of individuals recovering from substance use disorder (SUD) by embedding legal advocates in Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) programs to resolve complex issues that lead to or exacerbate opioid use, including income loss, housing instability, and family safety. As Philadelphians faced the social and economic fallout of the pandemic, the MLCP was an essential lifeline for patients in need of legal support.

**FAMILY LAW UNIT:** The pandemic lockdowns made domestic violence situations more frequent, more dangerous, and more difficult for survivors to reach out for help. Survivors were often trapped with their abusers, and existing warrants for arrests of abusers were not being enforced. When children were withheld from parents when lockdown began, PLA was there to ensure that rightful parents regained custody. As survivors navigated an unresponsive court system and increased threats to their and their children's safety, PLA remained a lifeline. PLA set up a referral system with Philadelphia's District Attorney Office of Family Violence to refer victim witnesses directly to PLA for support.



**CONSUMER HOUSING UNIT:** Evictions and foreclosures are always a public health hazard with devastating consequences. During a pandemic, the threat is elevated: people kicked out of their houses can't stay safe or quarantine at home. Our advocates worked tirelessly to ensure that tenants and homeowners were protected, aware of their rights, and able to access available assistance programs. When foreclosures resumed in August 2020, threatening homeowners' safety and security, PLA ensured that as many Philadelphians as possible knew how to take advantage of federal forbearance programs through a number of Zoom sessions and live streams on Facebook, and challenged lenders who did not uphold forbearance agreements. By connecting tenants and landlords with mediators through Philadelphia's Eviction Diversion Program, PLA helped hundreds reach resolutions to avoid eviction and remain safe in their homes.

**PENNSYLVANIA FARMWORKER PROJECT:** As soon as COVID-19 became widespread, farmworkers faced huge risks due to their status as essential workers, crowded living arrangements, and, for temporary H-2A visa workers, the need for international travel. PLA adapted to meet these needs and share information on newly created COVID-19 worker protections and stimulus payments, as well as pre-existing protections, including unemployment benefits and workplace health and safety regulations.

# IMPACT



## ALEX'S STORY

In 2019, Alex's sister unexpectedly passed away. He traveled to Oregon to pay his respects and, upon arriving, learned his sister's two young children (ages 11 and 6) were going to be placed in the foster care system. There were no family members nearby to care for the children.

After consulting with the proper authorities in Oregon and Pennsylvania, Alex brought the children to his home in Philadelphia and became their primary caregiver. However, due to the COVID-related court closures, he could not obtain a proper custody order in Philadelphia.

This roadblock had a major impact on the family: Alex's 11-year-old nephew needed emergency surgery to remove a crayon that had been lodged in the child's ear for several years. However, the surgery could not be performed until Alex was granted legal custody and could give consent for the surgery on his nephew. Luckily, the child was a patient at a Philadelphia Department of Public Health Center and the child's pediatrician recognized the family's need for legal assistance and referred Alex to the Medical-Legal Community Partnership (MLCP) at PLA.

**Alex soon thereafter met with a staff attorney from the MLCP. After consultation with the medical team and Alex, an emergency custody petition was filed with Family Court.**

Alex was able to quickly obtain a custody order for the two young children and his nephew was able to have the necessary surgery to remove the crayon from his ear. Alex could now legally care for the two young children that had tragically lost their mother.

# STORIES

## ROBIN'S STORY

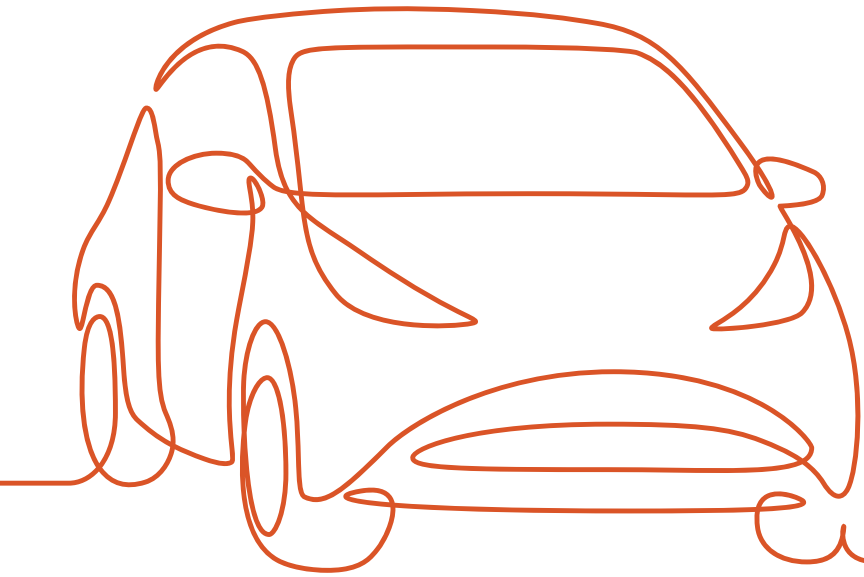
Robin was regular with her mortgage payments until COVID-19. Before the pandemic began, she was a home health aide. Her hours were unpredictable but she was able to average 40 hours a week. She was proud of her ability to always make ends meet for herself and her young children. When the pandemic hit Philadelphia, her hours were reduced by 30% and then to none at all.

Luckily, Robin knew about the SYHP Hotline at PLA. Robin called the hotline and received advice from a trained paralegal about how to put her mortgage into forbearance. They also worked together and applied for funds from the state's PMAP. **By reaching out to the hotline, Robin was able manage her payments and ensure her children get to stay in their childhood home.**





## Advocating for Gig Workers



### UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION WIN FOR GIG WORKERS:

Donald Lowman, Jr. filed for unemployment compensation on June 14, 2015 after he lost his job in the behavioral health sector. While he was waiting to hear back about his unemployment benefits, he started driving for UberX. When the Department of Labor and Industry finally contacted him in August, they informed him that while he would have been entitled to unemployment benefits from his initial job loss, they were denying him because driving for Uber was considered disqualifying “self-employment.”

Donald and his attorney, Julia Simon-Mishel, Supervising Attorney of PLA’s Unemployment Compensation Unit, knew from the beginning that this was an important case. They worked together to build a strong record that detailed Donald’s relationship with Uber and showed the multiple ways that Uber controlled his work. After five years of litigation, the fight for recognition of Donald’s rights as an employee for Uber ended in victory. **In 2020, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court agreed with Simon-Mishel’s argument that Donald was not “self-employed” while driving for Uber because he was not engaged in his own business, and Uber controlled and directed his work.** Donald could therefore not be disqualified from unemployment benefits based on his work for Uber. The way that governments classify gig workers is central to whether they are eligible for certain social insurance benefits, such as unemployment compensation.

**After the Supreme Court’s decision, Pennsylvania will no longer be able to disqualify Uber drivers from unemployment benefits; instead, the state will factor in Uber earnings when determining the amount of unemployment benefits an applicant should receive.** In fact, because of the Supreme Court’s decision, many drivers have now qualified for Pennsylvania unemployment compensation benefits during the pandemic based solely on their work for Uber.

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# COMMUNITY IMPACT

**237**

sexual assault survivors

**177**

veterans

**798**

domestic violence survivors

**5,823**

PEOPLE SERVED, INCLUDING:

**1,561**

seniors

**794**

homeowners better able to understand their rights and responsibilities in mortgage foreclosure

**20**

town halls hosted with legislators

**45**

community partners

**60K**

views on our Facebook Lives

**35K**

views per month on our website

**\$46 million**

received or retained in unemployment benefits

**572**

individuals received or retained unemployment benefits

**\$15,331**

recovered monthly in food stamps

**467**

individuals obtained, preserved, or increased food stamp amount

**\$50,299,916.50**

SAVED, RETAINED, OR RECOVERED FOR CLIENTS

# FINANCIALS



## SUPPORT & REVENUE

- GRANTS & CONTRACTS**  
\$6,587,054
- CONTRIBUTIONS**  
\$188,562
- PROGRAM INCOME**  
\$29,585
- INTEREST**  
\$2,340

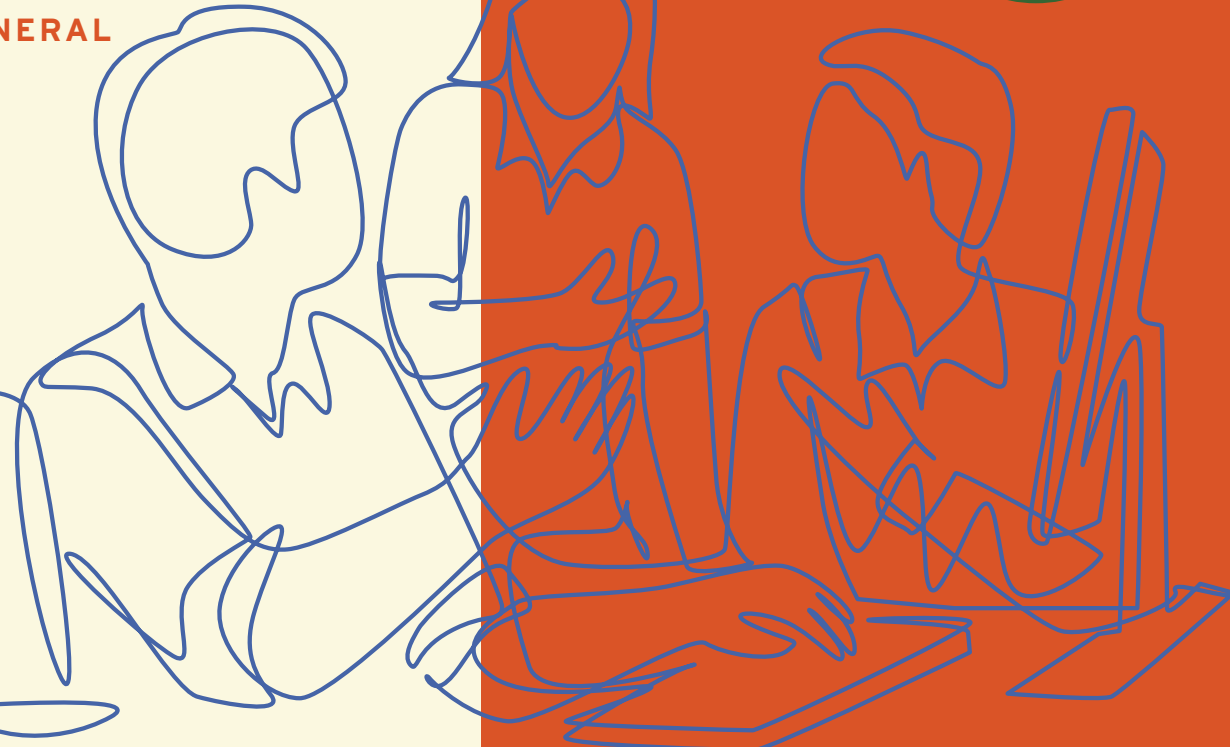
**TOTAL**  
**\$6,807,541**

## EXPENSES

- PROGRAM SERVICES**  
\$5,457,395
- MANAGEMENT & GENERAL**  
\$800,705
- FUNDRAISING**  
\$82,193

**TOTAL**  
**\$6,340,293**

**NET ASSETS**  
Beginning of Year  
\$414,301  
End of Year  
\$881,549



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