

PHILADELPHIA LEGAL ASSISTANCE





For 25 years, PLA has strived to advance the pillars of justice to build a more equitable society where everyone is able to provide for their basic human needs, live safe and healthy lives, and where justice is attainable regardless of income.

This past year, the pandemic continued to exacerbate persisting legal issues, and without PLA, tens of thousands of low-income Philadelphians would have had to forgo food, shelter, housing, and income or risk family safety. Without PLA, thousands more would have been driven further into deep poverty.

From our start in 1996, PLA's focus was on representing thousands of individual low-income Philadelphians who walked through our doors. In the years since, we have added a Medical-Legal Community Partnership and a Taxpayer Support Clinic to address health and wealth disparities that exist among racial minority and low-income communities. We continue to operate the Save Your Home Philly Hotline, originally established at the height of the foreclosure crisis to assist homeowners facing foreclosure, and which now also serves as a conduit to assist renters with accessing pandemic rental assistance and the novel Eviction Diversion Program. Today, our work extends beyond individual client representation to include systemic

advocacy, policy work, and extensive community outreach and engagement. We are a larger and more mature organization that has continued to evolve and progress in directions that result in the provision of the most impactful and highest quality legal services to those in need.

This annual report celebrates PLA's evolution over the past 25 years, and highlights stories of resilience and innovation from 2021. We recognize that the pursuit of a more just society is a collective effort and we would not be where we are today without your support. Thank you to all of our funders, donors, staff, volunteers, and community partners for supporting our critical efforts to advance the pillars of justice through the provision of civil legal aid.

ANITA SANTOS-SINGH
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

EQUITY

25 Years of Advancing

OPPORTUNITY

the Pillars of Justice

HOPE



MISSION

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



25 YEARS IN NUMBERS

Since 1996, PLA has provided free legal assistance to more than

100,000 *Philadelphians, including helping:*

38,837
with home ownership

24,645
with child custody

12,033
with unemployment compensation

4,211
with food stamps

4,130
with Medicaid

3,693
with welfare

3,315
with protection from abuse

2,781
with SSI assistance

15,749

The number of homes PLA has saved since operating
the Save Your Home Philly Hotline in 2008

OUR UNITS



GENERAL INTAKE

Our General Intake Unit supports people with legal issues outside of our established priority areas by coming up with creative solutions and preparing cases to be received by attorneys. In 2021, our General Intake Unit continued to handle calls about bankruptcy, debt collection, securing birth certificates, name changes, and raising estates, in addition to handling a rise in unemployment compensation calls. Our General Intake Unit constantly provides callers with hope by helping them navigate legal issues, preparing cases for representation free of charge, and sharing information to prevent future legal issues. The General Intake Unit helps people, families, and communities get the legal representation they need to secure income, solve sticky legal issues, and stay in their homes.

When Peter, an elderly man with stage four cancer, reached out to PLA regarding an American Express debt of \$15,000, paralegal Stephanie was ready to help. Peter is judgment proof, meaning AMEX could never collect any money from him due to his Social Security exempt income. Stephanie reached out to AMEX's legal team to make the case that Peter, a terminally ill and low-income client, cannot be expected to pay back this debt due to his financial and medical hardships. After providing proof of income and health documents, AMEX withdrew the case, and Peter and his family can finally devote their time to his health and wellbeing rather than a lawsuit.

FAMILY LAW

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. In addition to providing representation, the Family Law Unit assists a large number of survivors with pro se assistance, or assistance in self-representation. Without this work, many survivors would not know how to represent themselves in court and would not be able to successfully make their cases. As the largest family law service provider and referral source in Philadelphia, the Family Law Unit makes incredible efforts to make Family Court more accessible and equitable, particularly for non-English speaking clients and immigrants.

“Every day I talk to people, they are feeling more hopeful about their lives.”

GABY

SUPERVISING ATTORNEY

UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION

Our Unemployment Compensation Unit supports workers who find themselves unemployed, many for the first time during the pandemic, helping them to navigate new government programs and advocating for benefits on behalf of workers. In 2021, the PA unemployment compensation system was overhauled in a “Benefits Modernization,” causing mass confusion and fallout. PLA was there to run weekly workshops with community partners on the changes, advised on how to improve technology and language access, and created an entire website, UCHelp.org, to help workers navigate the system. In addition to individual advocacy for clients, PLA's UC Unit has been instrumental in advocating for worker's rights on a larger scale, winning three out of three cases they have taken to the PA Supreme Court on behalf of workers.

“We are one of the few places for clients with language access barriers to come and make sure they have an advocate and an interpreter available.”

LINA

PROJECT COORDINATOR

CONSUMER HOUSING

Our Consumer Housing Unit strives to prevent foreclosures for low-income homeowners, fight against predatory lending, and assist families in preserving the equity invested in their homes. In 2021, our Consumer Housing Unit continued to play a critical role in Philadelphia's Eviction Diversion Program and rental assistance programs, helping clients recover over \$4 million in just eight months. Our Consumer Housing Unit also expand resources and staff to address tangled titles, or property titles that do not accurately reflect the present homeowner's claim to their home.

“The biggest asset people have is their home. In terms of building wealth, especially in communities of color, preserving their homes as an asset is really really critical.”

KIMM

ATTORNEY

“When we preserve a house we're saving an affordable housing unit. If that person had to move, not only do they lose the equity that they've put into their home, but the possibility of owning another house is almost non-existent because of the affordable housing crisis. The most affordable housing is the housing people are in, and we go above and beyond to keep people in their homes.”

IRWIN

SUPERVISING ATTORNEY

As the pandemic continued throughout 2021, helping people stay in their homes was more critical than ever to prevent adverse health outcomes, particularly for immunocompromised individuals or survivors of domestic violence. PLA's team works not only to achieve positive outcomes for our clients, but also for Philadelphians as a whole. In 2021, as the result of PLA paralegal Hanae's advocacy efforts, the Philadelphia Eviction Diversion Program agreed to change its policies to better protect tenants experiencing domestic violence in their homes, including training Save Your Home Philly Hotline staff to screen for domestic violence, and keeping survivors and abusers separate during eviction mediation processes.

MEDICAL-LEGAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

The Medical-Legal Community Partnership (MLCP) 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. Our MLCP, now in nine sites across the city, helps ensure patients' access to medical care, nutritious food, stable housing, and safety at home. The MLCP empowers patients with legal information that they didn't know before, particularly for non-English speaking and immigrant populations. Because of the MLCP, clients are able to address health-harming legal issues, such as accessing insurance or public benefits, and improve their health outcomes overall.

“Once people know we are at their health center, they come back to us. I helped one woman with 20 legal matters over the past 9 years. What if she didn't know about PLA? What would have happened to her family? We are part of the community, we know the community, and the community knows us.”

CYNTHIA
ATTORNEY

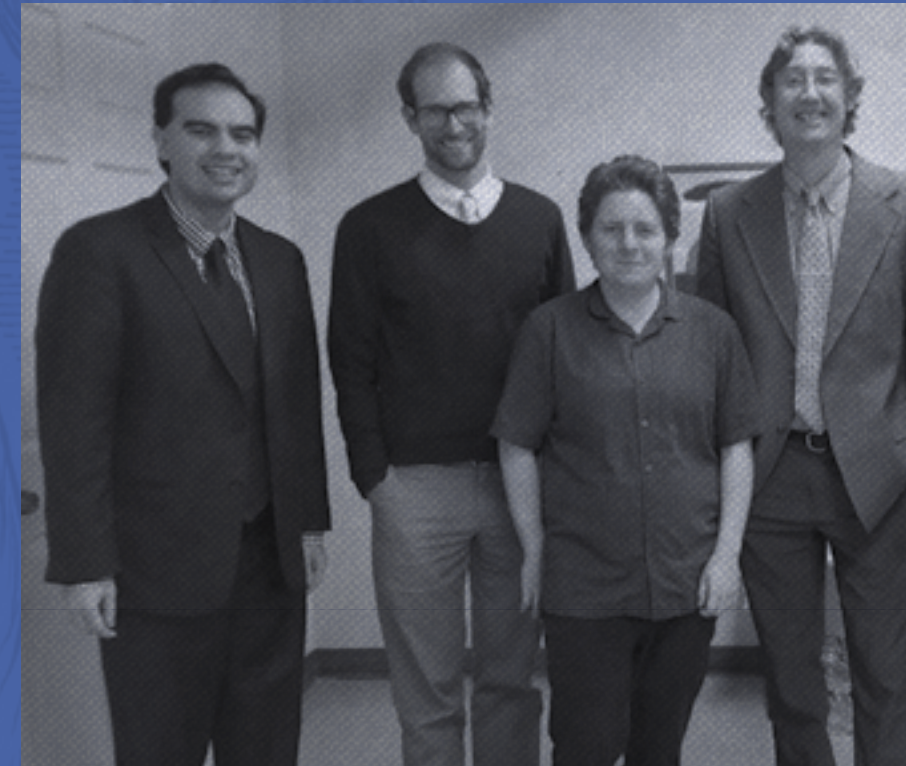
“You always hear about people slipping through the cracks and being denied services. I'm proud of our team because we don't allow that to happen. Our advocates go above and beyond in many instances. For example, after we helped a family get food stamps, the mom noted that she wished she had furniture for her daughters to do their homework on. An MLCP advocate went out and found her free furniture within a couple of days. We go above and beyond to help them however we can, even when that's outside of legal services.”

JAMES
SUPERVISING ATTORNEY



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, and struggles with debt. In 2021, our Taxpayer Support Clinic launched a poster campaign with the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) to increase awareness about worker misclassification and inform workers of their rights, distributing over 600 posters to low-income tax clinics and worker's rights organizations across the country. The Clinic also raised awareness around the child tax credit and helped clients, such as Abdul, get their refunds. In 2021, PLA's tax attorneys initiated a lawsuit on behalf of Abdul, a Syrian refugee who was not getting the child tax credit he was owed for his seven children after a tax preparer he paid filed his taxes incorrectly. PLA's lawsuit led to Abdul getting the \$1,100 he was owed to support his family, ensuring he wasn't left behind as a result of tax preparer error or language access barriers.



PENNSYLVANIA FARMWORKER PROJECT

The Pennsylvania Farmworker Project works to ensure that struggling farmworkers know their rights and can access legal support to fight against wage theft, unjust termination, unsafe working conditions, substandard housing, and workplace discrimination and harassment. In 2021, the PA Farmworker Project was able to resume in-person outreach and begin restoring the trust-based relationships that are key to their unit's success. Through outreach trips to farmworker housing camps and virtual know-your rights presentations with the Mexican consulate, back-to-school nights, and other state-wide collaborators, the Farmworker Project was able to educate hundreds of farmworkers on their rights.

“We travel 2–3 hours to meet our clients. We actually see what their working conditions look like, and when they talk to us about isolation, we know their experience firsthand because we have been there and seen their houses.”

ALEJANDRA
PARALEGAL

“With a small unit, we build a strong support system. We go to meet clients where they are at. People see familiar faces on every one of our trips, which builds trust and familiarity. Some people don't think they have any rights—their housing can be so bad, but they are just grateful for a roof over their head. We tell them their housing can and should be better, tell them we are there for them, and help them get the resources they deserve.”

JORDY
AMERICORPS VISTA

► **1996:** PLA was intentionally created to preserve federal Legal Services Corporation (LSC) funding for Philadelphia's low-income residents and to protect other public and private legal aid resources. At the time, federal legislation was threatening to restrict the use of LSC recipient Community Legal Services' sources of funding. CLS split to form PLA, which was created to apply for LSC funding and maximize the use of federal resources to serve Philadelphia's low-income communities.



1999: Custody and Support Assistance Clinic (CASAC) opens

1999: PLA and Women Against Abuse (WAA) partner to receive funding under the Violence Against Women Act for a project to help Limited English Proficient victims of domestic violence and expand services at WAA to include legal representation in custody and child support cases.

► **2000**



2001: Low Income Tax Clinic grant received from the Internal Revenue Service to provide tax preparation services and tax education to mushroom workers in Kennett Square in collaboration with Philly VIP

► **2003**



◀ **2004:** Beginning of Immigrant Women's Project to support immigrant domestic violence survivors



2005: *Don't Borrow Trouble* Hotline created to assist homeowner's burdened with predatory loans and to prevent predatory lending through consumer education

1996 - 2005



◀ **1996:** Initially, PLA had four practice areas that included unemployment compensation, family law, consumer housing, and public benefits and we operated a statewide migrant farmworker program.

“They [PLA] started from scratch, without an office, without staff, lawyers, or a board. After it received its first funding in March it has been seeing as many as 60 clients per day and providing them with the best legal representation. It has been a remarkable success in a short period of time.”

FRANCIS P. DEVINE III
THEN-CHANCELLOR OF THE
PHILADELPHIA BAR ASSOCIATION

► **1996:** Susan Tripp (right) is acting head of Philadelphia Legal Assistance Center Inc. Catherine C. Carr heads Community Legal Services.



◀ **2003**

“When the time came for the Hispanic Bar Association of Pennsylvania to choose the winner of this year's Justicia Award, it was not a difficult decision: Anita Santos, the executive director of the Philadelphia Legal Assistance Center.”

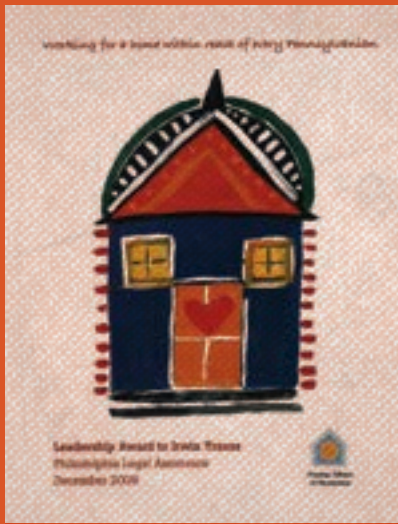
“Anita fits the bill perfectly. She has truly devoted her career to public service. She has, from day one, defined her choice to be a lawyer as a choice to better the people.”

ARLENE RIVERA FINKELSTEIN
THEN-HBA PRESIDENT





2006-2007: PLA receives Philadelphia VIP Legal Services Recognition Award



2009

2009: PLA and the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania award Leadership Award to Irwin Trauss

2009: PLA re-brands and expands the Don't Borrow Trouble Hotline to become the Save Your Home Philly Hotline to assist the thousands of homeowners facing foreclosure as a result of the financial crisis



2010



2012



2013: PLA's Medical-Legal Community Partnership started at Health Center 3 in West Philadelphia

2006 - 2013



2009

2008: PLA expands our homeownership hotline to create the Save Your Home Philly Hotline. Working with the Mortgage Foreclosure Steering Committee and the Save Our Homes Coalition, PLA helps create the Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program. The Philadelphia Diversion Program is one of the first in the country and becomes a model for other foreclosure mediation programs.



2008: Working with the Mortgage Foreclosure Steering Committee and the Save Our Homes Coalition, PLA helps create the Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program. The Philadelphia Diversion Program is one of the first in the country and becomes a model for other foreclosure mediation programs.

2010: Emilia Golanska receives Penn Law's Pro Bono Supervisor of the Year award for outstanding service to the Custody and Support Assistance Clinic (CASAC)



2012: Irwin Trauss, Housing Attorney, receives PLAN Excellence Award



"If you ever wondered if nonprofit organizations really help the community, I'm here to tell you PLA does."

I was a divorced mother of four teenagers and self-employed trying to make ends meet, which meant saving money was a priority. So, when I was approached with the option of re-financing my mortgage, I jumped on it. Little did I know there were more than a few unethical things done before, during, and after the re-fi process that led to a foreclosure notice from my "predatory lender." I made an appointment with ACORN to help with the foreclosure and they referred me to PLA. It was game on when I was assigned attorney Kimm T. For over a year, we brainstormed, she filed motions, we got rejected, and we appealed, but more importantly she never gave up. I did not give PLA or the attorney one penny for their services, yet, she never treated me less than. She understood my circumstances at that time had nothing to do with my intellectual abilities or character. We ultimately won against, not one, but all three major lending companies involved, and she was able to save my home. It was attorney Kimm T. that submitted a recommendation to the organization suggesting I become a Board member, which is another testament of PLA's integrity: they not only have staff and volunteers that care, but they also have Board members that know firsthand what it feels like to be in need. PLA was my voice when no one wanted to listen. Fast forward to current day: business is great, my kids are adults, and grateful is still my state of mind. I walked away from that stressful experience empowered. Now, as a Board member, I get to participate in giving back and witness history repeat itself by watching some amazing attorneys, staff, and volunteers help those in need. Thank You, PLA!"

DOROTHY

PLA CLIENT AND BOARD MEMBER





PLA PHILADELPHIA
LEGAL ASSISTANCE

▲
2014: PLA adopts new logo

2014: PLA's Medical-Legal Community Partnership expands to Health Center 4 in West Philadelphia.

2014: Family Court Help Center created as a result of PLA advocacy



▲
2014: PLA moves to 718 Arch Street

2014: David Hill receives PLAN Excellence Award



▲
2015: PLA Family Law Unit cuts ribbon to celebrate the opening of Philadelphia's Family Court Help Center



◀
2016



2018: The MLCP begins a collaboration with Delaware Valley Community Health to work with patients who are in recovery from opioid use disorder. The project is now operating at four health centers throughout the City.

2018: Unemployment Compensation Unit is created to reflect the expansion of advocacy and expertise in this area. Julia Simon-Mishel is named Supervising Attorney.



2020: The MLCP expands to Philadelphia Department of Public Health Centers 6 and 10 and Maria de los Santos Health Center

2020: PLA rapidly transitions to remote operations to continue ensuring access to justice throughout the pandemic

2020: The Save Your Home Philly Hotline provides telephone support for the first phase of Emergency Rental Assistance

2020: Landlord tenant advocates including the Save Your Home Philly Hotline work with the Division of Housing and Community Development to create the Eviction Diversion Program.



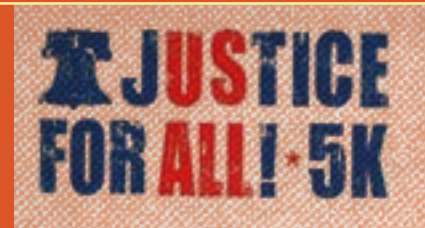
2014 - 2020



▲
2014: PLA receives funding from newly created LSC Pro Bono Innovation Fund for the MLCP



2014: Family Court Help Center created as a result of PLA's advocacy and with funding from the DOJ's Justice for Families grants program



▲
2015

2015: Jonathan Pyle receives PLAN Excellence Award

▼
2016



2019: PLA hires our first social worker to provide holistic representation to Family Law clients

2019: National Healthcorps members join the MLCP team

2019: Betty Green receives PLAN Excellence Award

BUILDING EQUITY FOR SIDE YARD CARETAKERS

April: Sheriff sales resumed and then stayed until September because of CHU advocacy

MLCP returns to in-person health center sites, adds partnership with Einstein Hospital, and doubles staff at Esperanza Health Center and Girard Medical Center

In 2021 PLA welcomed an Independence Fellow, Andria Bibiloni, to our Consumer Housing Unit to assist predominantly Latinx homeowners in North Philadelphia gain titles to home-adjacent vacant properties. This new initiative at PLA is a pilot program that recognizes a unique need for long-time residents to preserve their neighborhoods and protect generational family wealth in the face of gentrification. After many vacant lots were abandoned and fell to blight, local residents took care to clean the lots and transform them into safe spaces to grow food, let children play, and enjoy outdoor space in the neighborhood. As gentrification ramps up, these properties are now rapidly being auctioned and seized for new development. Under the Pennsylvania law of adverse possession, many lot stewards have acquired a right to own the property, but lack the resources to hire a lawyer to bring an action to quiet title. This is where PLA is stepping in to help homeowners with claims to home-adjacent properties secure the equity they earned from decades of caring for these properties, while aiding in neighborhood preservation.



New Leaders in Advocacy Award - Julia Simon-Mishel

Julia Simon-Mishel receives National Legal Aid & Defender Association New Leaders in Advocacy Award

July: PLA's Family Law Unit reopens Family Court Help Center and is first non-profit agency to resume services in court since the start of the pandemic

SUPPORTING IMMIGRANT SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE

All survivors of intimate partner violence experience barriers to seeking help. At PLA, we support immigrant survivors of violence by seeking to dismantle the additional barriers they face and providing solutions with a trauma-informed and holistic service model. PLA hosts an Immigrant Women's Hotline that accepts voice messages from survivors. All verbal communication with survivors is managed by bilingual staff members or occurs using language line, a live phone translation service, and we provide services to survivors of intimate partner violence regardless of their immigration status if civil legal service is necessary to ameliorate the violence they are experiencing.

September: Andria Bibiloni joins PLA as Independence Fellow to build equity for side yard caretakers

INNOVATORS IN TECHNOLOGY

PLA has become a leader for innovative problem solving through the use of technology to ensure that client needs do not go unmet.

UCHelp.org

In 2021, the Unemployment Compensation Unit launched a statewide web site, <https://uchelp.org>, to provide up-to-date information about unemployment programs to claimants and potential claimants. The resource is a joint project with partners across the state, including Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, Inc., Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Community Legal Services, UNITE HERE, and the Philadelphia Unemployment Project. Since the launch of UCHelp.org, the site has had more than 10,000 visitors.

Misclassification

Worker misclassification has serious financial ramifications: workers misclassified as 1099 contractors end up paying 15.3% of their wages in Social Security and Medicare tax, instead of the 7.6% regular W-2 employees pay. In 2021, PLA helped to create the new MySS8 website to help workers who have been misclassified as independent contractors complete tax forms to challenge their misclassification. Between this and the misclassification poster campaign with CUP, PLA has been able to distribute information and resources on misclassification to thousands of workers.

2021

SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED

Ken, a recent military veteran, was having difficulty adjusting to civilian life: balancing a budget, managing his finances, and building community. The social isolation and financial hardship resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation, and a reduction in work hours limited Ken's ability to make rental payments. Luckily, Ken was entered into the Eviction Diversion Program and met Katie, a Save Your Home Philly hotline paralegal at PLA. Katie connected Ken with a housing counselor, and Ken successfully applied for Emergency Rental Assistance. Ken used the funds awarded to him to cover his back rent and the late fees he owed his landlord. Now, Ken does not have to worry about losing his home and can remain stable while his employment picks back up. Furthermore, Katie and Ken worked together to contact the Veterans Multi-Service Center (VMC) so that Ken could find personalized assistance for his financial challenges and a supportive community to assist him throughout his transition into civilian life.



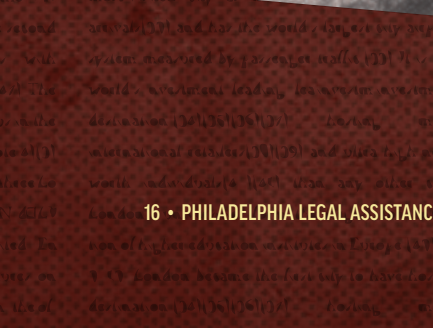
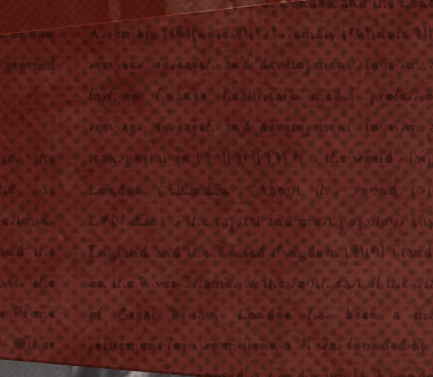
Tax Attorney Omeed Firouzi shares information on available tax credits on NBC10 News

In 2021, after 5 years of litigation, PLA attorney Susan Pearlstein settled a consolidated custody and protection from abuse case for an immigrant woman named Jedrael. Jedrael had been physically, sexually, and verbally abused and threatened by her children's father for years. PLA was able to obtain a custody order granting Jedrael primary physical and legal custody of her children, and worked with our partners at HIAS-PA to help Jedrael apply for a U-Visa. Since Jedrael no longer fears deportation, she was able to follow through with criminal convictions against her abuser for violating the PFA and assaulting Jedrael. Jedrael now has sole physical and legal custody of her children and has a Final Protection from Abuse Order for another 3 years. Thanks to the work of Susan and our Family Law Unit, Jedrael can finally feel safe and free.



June: PA Farmworker Project returns to in-person outreach





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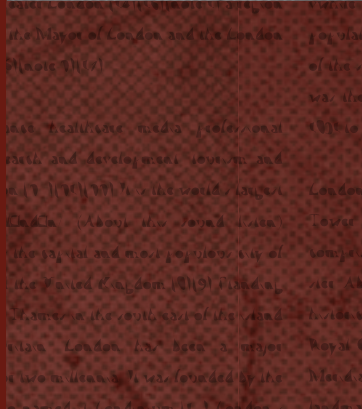
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Support & Revenue

Grants and Contracts: **\$7,715,885**

Contributions: **\$198,903**

Program Income: **\$72,291**

Interest Income: **\$882**

FINANCIALS

Expenses

Program Services: **\$6,977,429**

Management and General: **\$857,655**

Fundraising: **\$126,697**

Net Assets, Beginning

\$285,802

Net Assets, End

\$942,462

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Pennsylvania IOLTA

Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network

PHENND

Philadelphia Bar Foundation

Philadelphia Department of Public Health

Philadelphia Foundation

Philadelphia Health Partnership

The Workers' Lab

William Penn Foundation



Independence Foundation Celebrates PLA's 25th Anniversary With Challenge Grant!

The Independence Foundation has awarded PLA a challenge grant to raise \$50,000 through new or increased individual donations for our 25th anniversary. When we achieve this goal, the Independence Foundation will fully match us dollar-for-dollar. We thank our generous donors who have already given to this challenge, and invite you to join us in this endeavor to celebrate our anniversary and grow our individual giving program.



Scan here to make a gift and help us meet our challenge!





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