

# CENTERING COLLABORATION & COMMUNITY

**PLA** | PHILADELPHIA  
LEGAL ASSISTANCE

2022 ANNUAL REPORT



OUR 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.



DEAR FRIENDS,

PLA envisions a world of justice, equity, and opportunity where everyone has what they need to grow and live with dignity. In 2022, PLA continued to work towards this vision by providing free civil legal aid to thousands of low-income Philadelphians, helping them navigate complex systemic obstacles and get the legal support they need to put food on the table, leave unsafe relationships, and stay housed.

As our clients emerged from the pandemic, PLA’s dedicated staff continued to be there for them, as they dealt with lingering pandemic-related legal challenges and faced new, emerging legal needs head on. Centering community and addressing Philadelphians’ emerging needs through a collaborative, flexible and holistic approach is critical to ensuring our clients’ long-term stability, and this approach continues to inform our organization’s work and success. Remaining responsive to community needs is at the core of our ability to effectively represent Philadelphians in the toughest of times.

We not only care deeply about strengthening individuals’ ability to grow and live with dignity; we are committed to strengthening the resiliency of entire families, neighborhoods, and communities throughout Philadelphia. Preserving low-income homeownership and side yards keeps entire communities – primarily communities of color – standing together in the face of gentrification and rapid development. Providing trauma-informed representation to survivors of domestic violence and trafficking gives vulnerable Philadelphians a second chance to start a life of safety and stability for themselves and their families, strengthening the economy and the heart of the neighborhoods they reside in. Our Medical Legal Partnership (MLCP) continues to grow to meet Philadelphians where they are at, with attorneys and paralegals now embedded in thirteen community health centers and hospitals throughout the city.

In addition to the work of our core legal units, we continued to seek out creative, new ways to connect with community members in 2022. Our “Lawyers in Libraries” program connected PLA advocates with the North Philadelphia

branches of the Free Library of Philadelphia to provide regular workshops and resource tables on legal issues. Additionally, our partnership with the Frazier Family Coalition for Stroke Education and Prevention took a holistic look at health and stress reduction by showcasing how legal aid can lead to positive health outcomes.

2022 was also a year of celebration. Our Jubilee for Justice 25th Anniversary Celebration, hosted at the Philadelphia Zoo, gathered together hundreds of PLA’s supporters, friends, and clients for an unforgettable evening. Our new #JustPhilly community engagement initiative created opportunities for community members to learn about legal aid, meet like-minded peers, and connect through regular social events.

This annual report highlights stories of how our steadfast team centers community day in and day out and showcases some special, new initiatives from 2022. 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 meet the emerging needs of Philadelphia communities by providing creative and high-quality civil legal assistance. As we continue to center collaboration and community in years to come, I invite you to join us on our journey to create a more just Philadelphia. We can’t do this alone.

With gratitude,  
**ANITA SANTOS-SINGH**  
*Executive Director*



# JUBILEE FOR JUSTICE

On June 17th, 2022, PLA welcomed clients, friends, supporters, employees, and community partners to our Jubilee for Justice at the Philadelphia Zoo for an evening of dancing, dining, and fun to celebrate our 25th anniversary. It was such a joy to see so many of our PLA enthusiasts gathered together in celebration.



Our wonderful and dedicated PLA staff shared information and stories about our work via interactive learning stations. Local artist Maya Wilson debuted three pieces of incredible artwork showcasing the strength and resiliency of PLA clients. Walls for Justice, a local nonprofit that seeks to empower and enhance the platform of social movements, communities, people of color, and all other marginalized groups, through the use of murals, was on site with a specially designed mural representing PLA's journey over the last 25 years that guests stopped by to paint. The mural now sits proudly in PLA's office.

It was joyful to see kids enjoying petting animals in the petting zoo, getting their faces painted, and collecting stamps at the learning stations. A fabulous dinner was followed by a night of dancing and lively conversation.

We sincerely thank the Jubilee for Justice Committee, PLA Board of Directors, event staff and volunteers for their advocacy, their volunteerism, their financial support, and their belief in our mission. We will carry the success of the Jubilee for Justice into the future and look towards another 25 years of centering community and paving a path towards justice.



PHOTO CREDIT: Opposite and above, Jubilee for Justice event, Burkett Photography

Philadelphia-based artist Maya Wilson created three pieces of original artwork for PLA in celebration of our 25th Anniversary. The pieces depict four of our cherished clients and celebrate the real people that our mission seeks to empower.

Victor is a patient at Girard Medical Center, one of the locations of PLA's Medical Legal Community Partnership (MLCP). After being introduced to the MLCP, Victor was able to obtain medical insurance after discovering that he was eligible for Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities (MAWD). Since then, the MLCP has helped Victor obtain Food Stamps, reach a positive custody agreement, and renew his MAWD benefits year after year. Ensuring these benefits has been critical to ensuring that Victor, a resilient person in recovery from substance abuse disorder, can continue participating in GMC's Medication Assisted Treatment program. Victor is not only a champion for people in recovery, but is also a champion for the role of legal services in improving individual and community health. ■



PHOTO CREDIT: Victor (headshot), Maya Wilson





# OUR UNITS

PLA serves our clients holistically through seven specialized units. With a dedicated team of more than 80 attorneys, paralegals, and administrative staff, we provide clients with a range of services from brief legal advice, general guidance, and referrals to full legal representation in court.

## GENERAL INTAKE UNIT

General Intake Unit (GIU) helps Philadelphians resolve legal issues outside of our established priority areas, including issues such as bankruptcy, debt collection, securing birth certificates, name changes, and raising estates. The GIU 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.

## FAMILY LAW UNIT

Family Law Unit (FLU) is the largest family law service provider and referral source in Philadelphia. FLU supports survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in securing protection from abuse orders and providing representation and advice in child custody and child support matters. In addition to providing representation, FLU supports a large number of survivors by teaching them how they can represent themselves, a critical service in a system where 85-90% of litigants represent themselves. With staff located at Philadelphia’s Family Court Help Center, FLU makes incredible efforts to make Family Court more accessible and equitable, particularly for non-English speaking clients and immigrants.

## UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION UNIT

Unemployment Compensation Unit (UC) supports unemployed workers in navigating government programs to obtain unemployment compensation benefits. In addition to individual advocacy for clients, the UC Unit is instrumental in advocating for worker’s rights on a larger scale and has served as a tech leader by creating and managing UCHelp.org, a state-wide website to help workers navigate the complex UC system.

## CONSUMER HOUSING UNIT

Consumer Housing Unit (CHU) strives to prevent foreclosures for low-income homeowners, fight against predatory lending, and assist families in preserving the equity that’s been built by homeowners in their homes. CHU continues to play a critical role in Philadelphia’s Eviction Diversion Program and rental assistance programs, and has expanded resources and staff to address tangled titles, or property titles that do not accurately reflect the present homeowner’s claim to their home. Recently, CHU has begun representing homeowners in North Philadelphia with ownership claims to vacant side yards that they have cared for over decades.

## MEDICAL LEGAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Medical Legal Community Partnership (MLCP) integrates attorneys and paralegals directly into community health centers to meet patients who otherwise would not have sought out legal aid services where they are. Our MLCP, now in thirteen sites across the city, helps address health-harming legal issues to ensure patients’ access to medical care, insurance, nutritious food, stable housing, and safety at home. The MLCP empowers patients with critical legal information and representation, particularly for non-English speaking and immigrant populations and people recovering from opioid use disorder (OUD) through our partnerships with medication assisted treatment (MAT) programs.

## TAXPAYER SUPPORT CLINIC

Taxpayer Support Clinic (TSC) helps taxpayers navigate complex and confusing income tax challenges, from IRS audits to identity theft, delayed stimulus payments, and struggles with debt. In addition to assisting individual taxpayers, TSC strives to increase awareness about worker misclassification and ensure that workers don’t face additional barriers as a result of tax preparer errors, misclassification, and language access barriers.

## PENNSYLVANIA FARMWORKER PROJECT

Pennsylvania Farmworker Project (PFP) works to ensure that struggling H2-A visa farm workers 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. PFP’s model focuses on dedicated trust-building through direct outreach to farms in Pennsylvania, educating hundreds of farmworkers about their rights through these trips. PFP also routinely engages in community education through comprehensive presentations and workshops with trusted community partners, such as the Mexican Consulate of Philadelphia, to share information throughout farmworker communities.

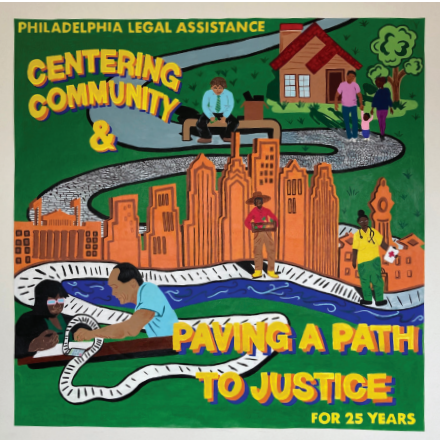


PHOTO CREDITS: Top and bottom, Walls for Justice, Middle and above, Jubilee for Justice event, Burkett Photography





# QUANTITATIVE IMPACT

In 2022, PLA provided free legal assistance to 8,202 Philadelphians, including helping:

2,114

INDIVIDUALS WITH HOME OWNERSHIP

1,276

PARENTS WITH CHILD CUSTODY

754

WORKERS WITH UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION

174

INDIVIDUALS WITH FOOD STAMPS

109

INDIVIDUALS WITH MEDICAID

178

INDIVIDUALS WITH WELFARE

306

SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE WITH PROTECTION FROM ABUSE

116

PEOPLE WITH SSI ASSISTANCE

2,465

PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

1,571

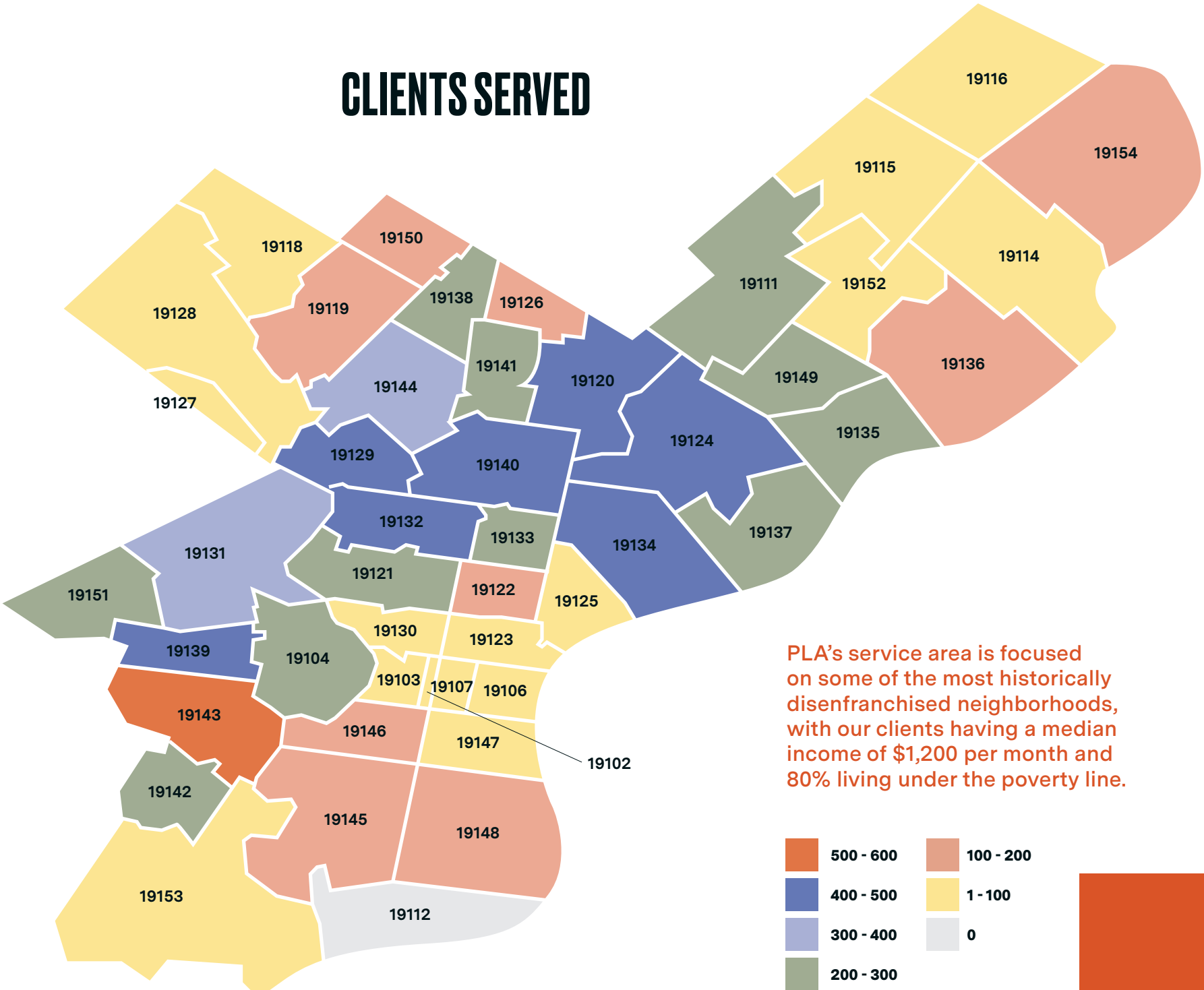
SENIORS

343

VETERANS



## CLIENTS SERVED





# BUILDING COMMUNITY EQUITY THROUGH HOMEOWNERSHIP



The Consumer Housing Unit (CHU) centers community by helping low-income Philadelphians build wealth and equity by preserving their family homes and side yards in the face of gentrification and rapid development. Home ownership is a critical form of asset building that contributes to intergenerational wealth building among Philadelphia's Black and Latinx communities.

**S**tarted in response to the foreclosure crisis of 2008, PLA's **Save Your Home Philly Hotline** is a collaboration with the Division of Housing and Community Development, the City's 21 Housing Counseling Agencies, and legal services to provide a centralized portal for homeowners facing real estate and tax foreclosure or other threats to ownership of their property. The SYHP Hotline has since served to coordinate emerging housing services, such as assisting renters with pandemic rental assistance and homeowners with mortgage and utility assistance programs. PLA's Hotline staff are able to assist homeowners by providing advice, scheduling an appointment with a housing counselor, or referring the caller to an attorney for full representation.

Untangling "tangled titles," property titles that do not accurately reflect the present homeowners' claim to their home, is a critical step in ensuring Philadelphians remain in their family homes, especially after the family member on the deed passes away before transferring ownership to their heirs.

**PLA's tangled title team has more than doubled in size over the past year to support the thousands of Philadelphians with tangled titles.**

In 2022, our newest CHU project continued to help Latinx homeowners in North Philadelphia secure the equity in their cared for side yards. Through this project, homeowners like Melinda (pictured), who cared for her cherished side yard and garden for 25 years, are able to gain titles to the home-adjacent vacant properties they have tended and acquired legal ownership rights to. Since the project's start in 2021, the project attorney has assisted 30 individuals, the majority of whom have limited English proficiency, are elderly, or disabled. ■



PHOTO CREDIT: *Opposite and above*, Melinda and Andria, Melinda (headshot), Israel Vasquez





# CREATING A MORE JUST PHILLY

In 2022, PLA launched our #JustPhilly initiative to create three opportunities for passionate community members to engage with PLA and help create a more just Philadelphia.

Community members can get involved with #JustPhilly by becoming an Emerging Leader, Community Advocate, or Sustainer of Justice. Low-income Americans do not receive any or enough legal help for 92% of their civil legal problems, and as a Community Advocate you can help raise awareness on the availability of civil legal aid by requesting outreach toolkits to help more people access free legal aid. Sustainers of Justice, monthly donors – of any amount – to PLA, help sustain the critical work being done to build a more just Philadelphia.

The Emerging Leaders program, the core component of #JustPhilly, was created to cultivate a generation of collaborative, diverse leaders that have the confidence, will, and ability to drive transformative change in Philadelphia. We recognize that civil legal aid is inherently connected to the larger anti-poverty movement in Philadelphia.

Emerging Leaders creates opportunities for justice-oriented young leaders across fields to meet like-minded peers, develop leadership skills, and collaborate to advance social justice efforts in Philadelphia. In our first year, we hosted four events and engaged more than 100 emerging leaders. ■



PHOTO CREDIT: Opposite, above and below, #JustPhilly event



\$1 PUT INTO CIVIL LEGAL  
AID YIELDS A \$12 RETURN  
ON INVESTMENT IN  
ECONOMIC BENEFITS FOR  
CLIENTS. (IOLTA)



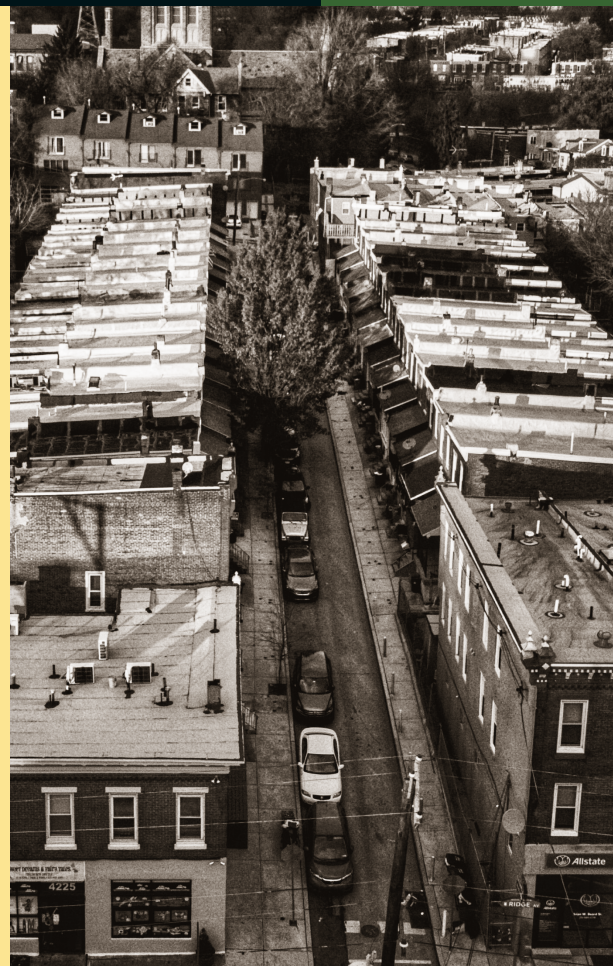


# ACHIEVING FINANCIAL STABILITY

Many families rely on Earned Income Tax Credits and Child Tax Credits to provide for their children and cover their monthly rent, utilities, and food expenses, and rely on these forms of income in their financial planning.

Yet, low-income people continue to be audited by the IRS at disproportionate rates, holding up these critical dollars from reaching the families that need them most. PLA's Taxpayer Support Clinic (TSC) helps Philadelphians dispute audits, prove they are eligible for tax credits and refunds, and receive all of the benefits they deserve. This not only positively impacts these individual families, but also helps financially and emotionally strengthen the communities in which they live, helping people get back on their feet and feel a sense of economic security.

As of 2022, PLA also serves as the collaborative statewide Unemployment Compensation (UC) resource center for CBOs, legal aid organizations, and social service organizations who assist low-income and underserved workers and their families. Historically, PLA has seen that Spanish-speaking community members disproportionately come through intake with fault and fraud overpayments, often caused by a misunderstanding of the system and, many times, never appealed by the claimant because they did not understand the notice. Not only are these overpayments financially harmful to these workers, they also limit their access to future benefits, and many times the workers never want to interact with the UC system again. Through our new UC Navigator program, PLA has partnered with CareerLink North in North Philadelphia to provide in-person UC navigation assistance to low-income, Spanish-speaking community members by stationing a PLA staff member at CareerLink North two days per week. ■



# COLLABORATING TO PROVIDE HOLISTIC CARE FOR SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE

The Family Law Unit (FLU) strives to provide trauma-informed care to the survivors of domestic violence and trafficking that they serve by collaborating with numerous partner agencies throughout Philadelphia. Together through partnerships with Women Against Abuse, Women Organized Against Rape, and HIAS-PA, FLU works to address the barriers and unmet needs of the under-represented Limited English Proficient and immigrant communities as well as the gaps in multidisciplinary services to sexual assault and domestic violence victims. ■

# MEDICAL LEGAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

The MLCP is founded with the belief that collaboration can improve the health of entire communities by bringing legal services to people where they are, when they otherwise likely would not have sought out legal aid. As a generalist practice, the MLCP helps patients stay in their homes, escape violent relationships, secure public benefits, reduce healthcare costs, and more. With advocates embedded in 13 health centers and hospitals throughout the city, the MLCP is particularly effective in reaching under-served Limited English Proficient and immigrant communities.

After suffering a stroke and enduring triple bypass surgery, Carlos' doctor referred him to the MLCP to get help applying for disability. Carlos doesn't speak English and was quickly connected with one of the MLCP's bilingual advocates. They soon discovered that Carlos' identity had been stolen, resulting in additional issues with his latest tax return. By this point, Carlos did not have money to buy food or pay rent, which he was already behind on. Carlos and his MLCP advocate worked together to not only resolve his identity theft and tax return issues, but secure the Social Security income for his disability that he so critically needed. Serving clients, such as Carlos, through a holistic approach is critical to ensuring our community members' long-term stability. ■



PHOTO CREDIT: Carlos (headshot), Israel Vasquez



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# FINANCIALS

## SUPPORT & REVENUE

|                    |             |
|--------------------|-------------|
| GRANTS & CONTRACTS | \$8,939,467 |
| CONTRIBUTIONS      | \$288,860   |
| PROGRAM INCOME     | \$0         |
| INTEREST           | \$2,625     |
| TOTAL              | \$9,230,952 |

## EXPENSES

|                                |             |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| PROGRAM SERVICES               | \$8,044,223 |
| MANAGEMENT & GENERAL           | \$673,954   |
| FUNDRAISING                    | \$289,522   |
| TOTAL                          | \$9,007,699 |
| NET ASSETS – BEGINNING OF YEAR | \$655,613   |
| NET ASSETS – END OF YEAR       | \$878,866   |

PHOTO CREDIT: *Opposite and right*, Jubilee for Justice event, Burkett Photography





# OUR DONORS

Our friends at the Independence Foundation awarded PLA a challenge grant to raise \$50,000 through new or increased individual donations for our 25th anniversary. Thanks to your generosity, we achieved our goal and the Independence Foundation matched your donations dollar-for-dollar! We thank our generous donors for supporting this milestone with us.

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| Independence Foundation   |  | Philadelphia Health Partnership                  |                         |



PHOTO CREDIT: Cover and back cover, Client and staff (headshots) Israel Vasquez and Maya Wilson

