

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

LEGACY

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IN ACTION



OUR MISSION

ENFORCE AND PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES BY PROVIDING ACCESSIBLE, CREATIVE, AND HIGH-QUALITY

LEGAL ASSISTANCE AND WORKING COLLABORATIVELY FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE.



Heritage (n.) Something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor, an inheritance.



DEAR FRIENDS,

As I look back on the challenges and triumphs of 2023, the word heritage resonates so strongly with me.

After leading Philadelphia Legal Assistance from its creation in 1996 to mid-2023, Anita Santos-Singh passed away on January 13, 2024. PLA staff found ourselves looking for firm footing as we coped with Anita's medical leave and then her death. We were in a completely new situation as an organization, missing Anita's guidance, her steady hand, her optimism, and her vision. What did Anita leave us?

Thankfully, in addition to building a strong organization that serves thousands of Philadelphians each year, Anita left PLA a generous legacy. We inherited her commitment to equal justice, her creativity, her agility, and her excellence. She curated a group of dedicated individuals ready to help, ready to answer the call, ready to do what is necessary to even the playing field for low-income Philadelphians.

PLA has grown significantly in the past two years. We added staff resources to our Consumer Housing Unit to respond to the many homeowners with COVID-related hardships and tangled titles. Our Medical Legal Community Partnership has grown to seventeen sites and twenty-one advocates, bringing embedded, community-based legal assistance to low-income patients across Philadelphia. Advocates across Pennsylvania and the nation look to our Unemployment Unit for assistance and guidance. Our Family Law Unit continues to represent the most endangered victims of domestic violence and sexual assault but also provides self-help assistance and resources to many more.

Our advocates, both attorneys and paralegals, find creative solutions when clients need help in a system that is overburdened or doesn't provide an answer. The paralegals who staff our Eviction Diversion Program hotline have led two distinct

efforts aimed at assisting tenants in need. One created negotiation training for tenants who are not eligible for eviction diversion mediation, others are creating and distributing vital information to tenants about illegal eviction and how they can exercise their rights.

One of our new advocates calculated the amount of public benefits she was able to obtain for clients as well as wrongful debt or overpaid benefits avoided. In under six months, she was able to realize a swing in financial outcomes of over \$175,000, and in many cases provided disabled and high-need clients with access to home healthcare services, medical insurance, and disability benefits.

Our unemployment unit continues its statewide and national advocacy work on benefits modernization and creating access to benefits that is user-friendly, responsive to claimant concerns, and efficient, while providing individual representation to unemployed Philadelphians that is second to none.

We have challenges. We need to find the resources to continue the programs that have been built with pandemic-related funding. We need to continue to serve others with dignity, with creativity, with inclusivity, and with zeal. We need to write PLA's next chapter, building on our rich heritage left to us by a great leader. We are so grateful to all of our supporters, our partners, and our funders. We look forward to the work ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maureen Olives". The signature is written in a dark color, possibly black or dark blue ink, on a light background.

MAUREEN OLIVES

PLA's Interim Executive Director

QUANTITATIVE IMPACT



10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

of the Medical Legal Community Partnership (MLCP)

Since its inception, the MLCP has played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between healthcare and legal services, providing comprehensive support to underserved communities in Philadelphia.

In 2023, Philadelphia Legal Assistance's Medical Legal Community Partnership (MLCP) celebrated a significant milestone, marking its 10th anniversary. The partnership brings together legal professionals and healthcare providers to address the social determinants of health that often have legal roots, such as housing, education, and income security. By integrating legal assistance into healthcare settings, the MLCP ensures that individuals and families receive holistic support, addressing not just their medical needs but also the legal issues that impact their overall well-being.

The importance of the MLCP project lies in its innovative approach to public health and justice. Over the past decade, it has demonstrated that legal interventions can be a crucial component of preventive

healthcare. By resolving legal issues that contribute to poor health outcomes, the MLCP has helped to improve the quality of life for countless Philadelphians, reducing stress and removing barriers to accessing essential services.



Staff members celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Medical Legal Community Partnership in September 2023

The project's success has also highlighted the value of interdisciplinary collaboration, setting a precedent for similar initiatives across the nation. As the MLCP celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2023, its enduring impact serves as a testament to the power of combining legal and medical expertise to create healthier, more equitable communities.



Interim Executive Director Maureen Olives, and board members Valentine Brown and Melanie Foreman celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Medical Legal Community Partnership in September 2023



CONSUMER

HOUSING UNIT

Illegal Eviction ACTION TEAM

The paralegals on our Eviction Diversion Program (EDP) hotline work tirelessly to help Philadelphians at risk of losing their housing.

EDP paralegals Jax Hebner, Sam Curtis, and Alexandria Oliver have used their expertise working on the hotline to contribute to the Education Subcommittee of the city's Illegal Eviction Action Team. This subcommittee consists of members from PLA, the Attorney General's Office, HelpMLP, Community Legal Services, Legal Clinic for the Disabled, Senior Law Center, Urban League, the Mayor's office, and the Citizens Police Oversight Commission. Together, they collaborate to develop educational programs and materials about illegal evictions and strategies to combat them.

Last year the subcommittee created a Know Your Rights flyer for tenants, and translated it into Simplified Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic. Additionally, they developed three more flyers focused on police responses to illegal evictions, restoring service after illegal utility shut-offs, and The Fair Housing Commission's role in holding landlords accountable.

The subcommittee also created a PowerPoint training presented via Zoom for tenant advocates, based on the information from the flyers. The aim is to conduct monthly online training sessions and eventually offer in-person training for the public. The flyers will serve as supplementary materials to the training, providing detailed information covered during the presentations.

Working on the hotline is a difficult job. Not everyone who calls is entitled to the benefits of the Eviction Diversion Program. These educational materials and additional resources are making a difference. When people are empowered to enforce legislation outside of the courts, it strengthens the fight within the courts. This is just one of many ways that PLA's advocates expand the reach of their knowledge and expertise to help even more members of our community.



TAXPAYER

SUPPORT CLINIC

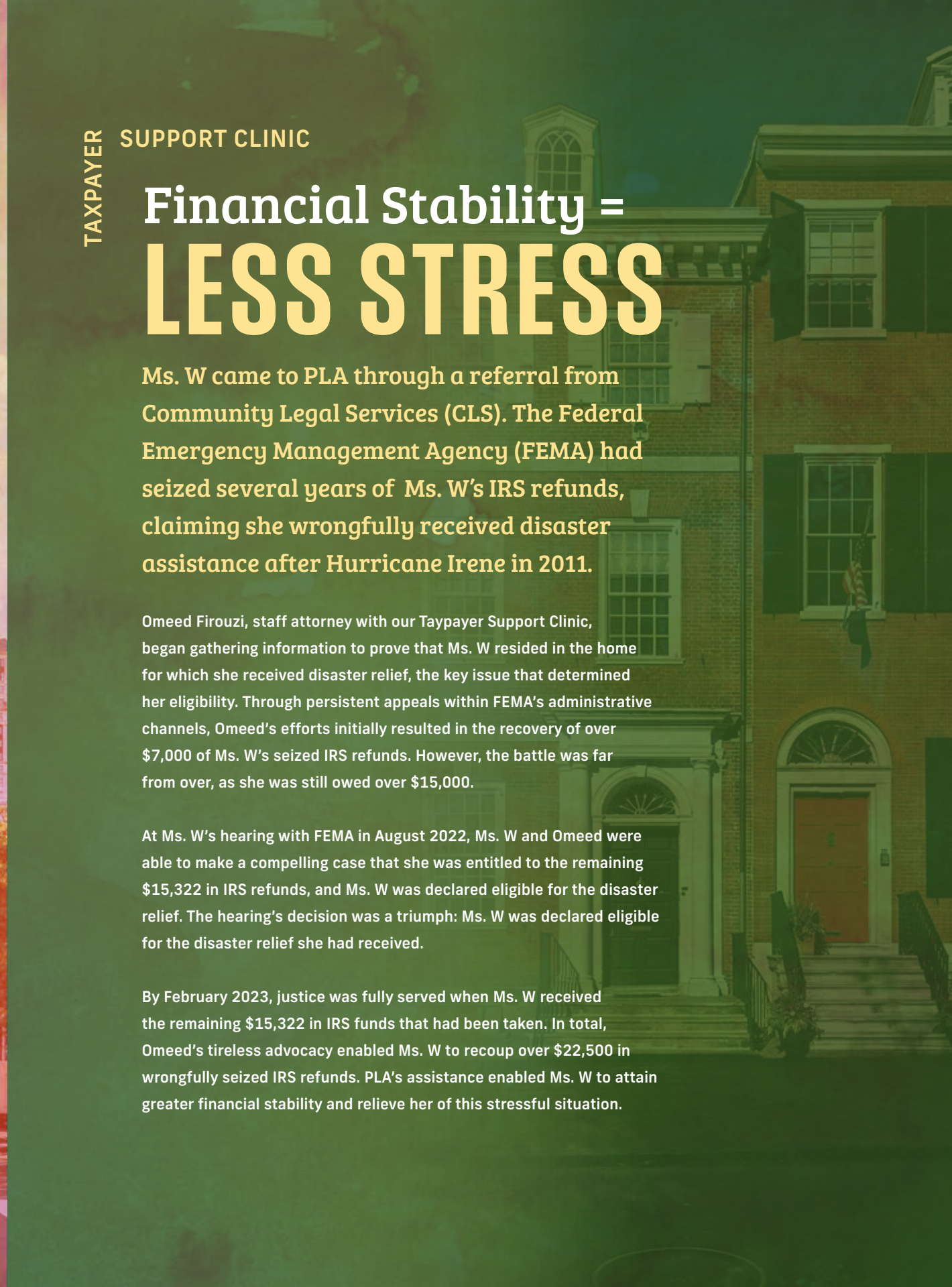
Financial Stability = LESS STRESS

Ms. W came to PLA through a referral from Community Legal Services (CLS). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had seized several years of Ms. W's IRS refunds, claiming she wrongfully received disaster assistance after Hurricane Irene in 2011.

Omeed Firouzi, staff attorney with our Taxpayer Support Clinic, began gathering information to prove that Ms. W resided in the home for which she received disaster relief, the key issue that determined her eligibility. Through persistent appeals within FEMA's administrative channels, Omeed's efforts initially resulted in the recovery of over \$7,000 of Ms. W's seized IRS refunds. However, the battle was far from over, as she was still owed over \$15,000.

At Ms. W's hearing with FEMA in August 2022, Ms. W and Omeed were able to make a compelling case that she was entitled to the remaining \$15,322 in IRS refunds, and Ms. W was declared eligible for the disaster relief. The hearing's decision was a triumph: Ms. W was declared eligible for the disaster relief she had received.

By February 2023, justice was fully served when Ms. W received the remaining \$15,322 in IRS funds that had been taken. In total, Omeed's tireless advocacy enabled Ms. W to recoup over \$22,500 in wrongfully seized IRS refunds. PLA's assistance enabled Ms. W to attain greater financial stability and relieve her of this stressful situation.





This is the transformative
power of civil legal aid.

CONSUMER HOUSING UNIT

The Most Impact:

HELPING SOMEONE STAY IN THEIR HOME

Tyrone reached out to the Save Your Home Philly Hotline as he faced tax foreclosure due to skyrocketing property taxes from rapid gentrification in his neighborhood. Battling cancer and with two of his five children also suffering from severe medical conditions, Tyrone struggled to manage healthcare costs and the sharp increase in real estate taxes in his neighborhood. Paralegal Nicole Piusiensi was able to secure a Tier 5 Owner-occupied Real Estate Tax Payment Agreement for Tyrone, relieving this huge financial burden, and allowing his family to remain in their generational home, attend to their medical needs, and avoid foreclosure.



Anita Santos-Singh, Founding Executive Director of Philadelphia Legal Assistance and legal services advocate for 34 years, passed away on January 13, 2024, at the age of 59. Anita was one of the brightest lights of the Philadelphia legal community, laser-focused on bringing life-changing legal assistance to low-income and vulnerable Philadelphians.

**Serving others was Anita's passion.
We continue that work in her memory.**

Originally from Brownsville, Texas, Anita came to Philadelphia in 1982 to attend the University of Pennsylvania as an undergraduate student. After graduating from the University of Michigan Law School in 1989, she returned to Philadelphia, where she would devote her legal and leadership talents to those most in need and least able to afford an attorney.



Anita and fellow classmates graduating from the University of Michigan Law School. Photo courtesy of Susan A. Rodriguez

Anita began her legal career as a housing attorney at Community Legal Services in 1989, protecting homeowners facing mortgage foreclosure and the loss of their homes. Widely admired by her colleagues, Anita was tapped, at the age of 32, to become the founding Executive Director of Philadelphia Legal Assistance in 1996, a new organization created to serve Philadelphia's poor with federal funds.



Anita posing at PLA's offices when we moved to 718 Arch Street in 2014

In addition to Anita's deep commitment, she brought many talents to her daily work: intense drive, vision, wisdom, and inclusiveness. Never satisfied with the status quo, she sought every opportunity to expand PLA's reach and services. She forged vital collaborations with community organizations, non-profits, governmental entities, and grassroots communities to reach people where they were and to empower them to successfully navigate the difficult and sometimes life-threatening challenges they faced.

Anita was a lover of live music, travel, knitting, and Rafael Nadal. She loved to laugh out loud, to dance, and to enjoy good food. She was thoughtful, kind, inquisitive, and loving. She was a role model, mentor, coach and innovator.



PLA Managing Attorney Emilia Golanska, Anita, and PLA Supervising Attorney James Tiderington



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FINANCIALS

INCOME



\$9,237,161

EXPENSES



\$8,775,558

GRANTS

Legal Services Corporation

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Jefferson Health Plan

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Delaware Valley Community Health

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Shelly Solomon

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Zach Stein

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Marisa Tilghman

Emeli Torres

Paul Uyehara

Kathi Westcott

Elizabeth Wingfield



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