

# ADAPTING *and* ENDURING





Dear friends,

In November 2024, PLA's Board of Directors chose me to lead Philadelphia Legal Assistance as its Executive Director. To say that I am beyond honored to serve in this role is an understatement. I have admired, respected, and been moved by PLA's work for over two decades. I am looking forward to the challenges and rewards of leading such an amazing group of advocates.

I am a thirty-year veteran of legal services and public interest adjacent work. My first position in Pennsylvania Legal Services was as a Martin Luther King Intern, assigned to what was then known as Legal Services of Northeastern PA. Upon graduating from the University of Buffalo Law School a year later, I joined Legal Services of NE PA as a staff attorney, concentrating on SSI and Social Security Disability work in Wilkes-Barre, PA. In 1999, I relocated to Philadelphia where I worked at Women Against Abuse and then Philadelphia Legal Assistance as a family lawyer representing domestic violence survivors in custody, child support, Protection from Abuse, and divorce cases.

After eleven years of providing direct service to hundreds of clients, I decided to work at Temple Law School as their Director of Public Interest Programs. I was responsible for counseling and mentoring law students who wanted a career in public interest law, and also for fostering pro bono opportunities. Five students that I worked with are now my colleagues at PLA, and many more fill positions at public interest organizations in Philadelphia and beyond. It is one of my great joys to witness their phenomenal work.

Returning to PLA twelve years ago in a management role seemed like the next logical step in my career, as it had remained a special place to me. I wanted to be a part of its wonderful energy, collegiality and top notch advocacy. Although I did not see myself in this role then, leading PLA is absolutely where I should be as we work to adapt to this moment in our history.

The ability to adapt and endure has always been PLA's superpower. We are so proud of our programmatic agility, which all comes down to the special people who use their talents to fulfill PLA's mission each day. Whether its pursuing an appeal to the Superior or Commonwealth Court, obtaining an Owner Occupied Payment Agreement to keep an owner from losing the family home, taking an emergency custody case for a survivor in great danger of physical harm, or providing onsite legal assistance to patients at a free community health center, we work with compassion, expertise, and tenacity to achieve solutions for our clients.

Our next chapter will require new expertise and support if we are to endure. Our core federal funding was reduced by 17% in November 2024, due to a reduction in Philadelphia's poverty population as compared to national numbers. Despite this finding, Philadelphia remains the poorest big city in the U.S, and nearly one out of ten Philadelphians experience deep poverty, or income below 50% of the poverty threshold. With economic uncertainty increasing and COVID related funds winding down, we need to develop new sources of financial support or face deep service cuts. These cuts will be especially painful as 92% of low-income Americans already do not receive any or enough legal services when they lose a job, need a protection order, or risk losing their home.

We are deeply grateful to our donors and funders, some of whom are longtime supporters, some brand new in 2024. Your faith and trust in us as good stewards of your financial support means a great deal. We will use your gift wisely and will work to inspire further support from you and new donors as we adapt and endure.

*Maureen Olives*

MAUREEN OLIVES  
Executive Director



# Available Where the HELP IS NEEDED

Our innovative approach sets us apart from other medical-legal partnerships around the country. Over 11 years, we have carefully built trusting relationships with health center staff by learning to adapt to each health center's needs and the legal needs of the communities who seek their services.

One client was thrilled with the help she received from MLCP Staff Attorney, Lila Sevener in 2024:

**"PLA's MLCP helped me with a situation where I didn't have the energy to keep fighting, and I was ready to give up. My advocate, MLCP Staff Attorney Lila Sevener, helped me file an appeal, which I wasn't going to go through with because it was so overwhelming. Because of Lila's help, I was able to get the benefits that I needed. Lila has a gift for attention to detail and is wonderful. She's very smart and treated me respectfully. She's not a pushover, but she has a sweet disposition. I hope that your MLCP program and services are available to other people because of the way they helped me. I know for a fact a lot of people could use this program; this work is so important."**

*- MLCP Client*

Our **MEDICAL LEGAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP** (MLCP) helps address socio-legal needs, such as medical insurance, housing stability, and income support to improve lives in neighborhoods around Philadelphia.

# 1,178

Number of patients served

# 166

Number of Medicaid/  
Medicare cases



Embedded within community health centers, the MLCP integrates legal advocacy with medical care. Legal advocates collaborate with healthcare providers to screen patients for social and legal needs, addressing issues such as lack of insurance, substandard housing conditions, and access to public benefits, all of which can significantly impact health outcomes. What started as one attorney running the MLCP on a completely volunteer basis, has expanded to operating at 17 sites that include all 8 of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health Centers (PDPH), two Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and hospital-based community practices at Einstein Medical Center and Temple Health.

At PLA, our holistic approach to resolving complex tangled title and foreclosure cases not only protects homeowners from losing their homes but also places them on a path toward lasting financial stability.

One 2024 success story illustrates this perfectly. Our client was one of 18 heirs to a family home, which he had lived in and maintained for many years. Initially, he managed to keep up with the previous owner's mortgage payments, but eventually fell behind and faced imminent foreclosure. Without intervention, he and his family stood to lose their home.

PLA stepped in and provided comprehensive legal support. Our team tracked down all 17 other heirs, navigated the probate process, and successfully transferred the deed into our client's name. Additionally, we negotiated a favorable loan modification, effectively resolving the foreclosure crisis.

Thanks to PLA's advocacy, our client secured an affordable monthly housing payment of just over \$600. Beyond simply preserving his home, this legal victory unlocked approximately \$100,000 in net equity, empowering our client with lasting financial security and a solid foundation for intergenerational wealth.

Since Jan. 1, 2022, PLA has  
obtained more than  
\$4.6 million in HAF funds  
for clients!

The numbers speak for themselves. Preventing evictions and foreclosures brings stability and prevents escalating legal, financial, and social problems.

# 4,641

Number of housing  
clients assisted  
in 2024

# 43,718

Number of calls fielded  
by Eviction Diversion  
Hotline staff

The **CONSUMER HOUSING UNIT** strives to prevent foreclosures and evictions for low-income homeowners, combat predatory lending practices, and assist families in preserving their homes' integrity. Services include connecting clients with housing counselors through the Save Your Home Philly Hotline, running Philadelphia's Eviction Diversion Hotline, fighting mortgage foreclosures, aiding with real estate tax issues, facilitating Chapter 13 bankruptcy filings, and resolving tangled titles to ensure homeowners have the necessary legal tools to protect their properties.



# Keeping People **IN THEIR HOMES**



Focused on assisting survivors of domestic and sexual violence, the **FAMILY LAW UNIT (FLU)** helps individuals leave abusive relationships and build independent lives. The unit provides legal support in the areas of Protection From Abuse orders, custody, child support, and divorce.

746

Number of custody cases in 2024

PROTECTING

*Survivors*

1,233

Number of Family Law clients in 2024



FLU staffs the Help Center in Philadelphia's Family Court for victims of interpersonal violence. This work includes court-based access to safety planning, outreach, legal information, and legal representation to survivors in custody matters. FLU offers and advocates for court-based training on language access and trauma-informed services within the civil justice system.

**A SURVIVOR'S STORY**

After her 14-year-old son experienced verbal and physical abuse from his father, a mother sought to modify their custody agreement but was unsure how to proceed. One of PLA's family law attorneys guided her through the legal process, helping her request sole legal and primary physical custody — a strategic ask that would better protect her son. Over several months and multiple court hearings, the attorney helped present a compelling case, including evidence of past violence and the son's fears of staying with his father. Though the judge initially denied the request, a motion for reconsideration and full evidentiary hearing led to a successful outcome. With custody secured, the mother could enroll her son in a school where he thrived. Today, both mother and son feel safe and optimistic about the future.



Every year, thousands of Pennsylvanians face challenging problems trying to access the unemployment compensation benefits that they are owed.

553

Number of clients in 2024

171

Number of UC clients for whom we obtained, preserved, or increased benefits

The Unemployment Unit is also dedicated to making systemic impact and fair outcomes for claimants through administrative appeals and prioritizing our appellate practice. In Pennsylvania, these claimants automatically have the right to appeal to the Commonwealth Court and proceed without a fee, yet most proceed without legal representation, making the unemployment docket—comprising over 20% of the court's cases—predominantly pro se.

Since 2014, the unit has litigated twenty cases in Pennsylvania appellate courts, achieving favorable decisions in ten, addressing and correcting problematic law in two cases despite an unfavorable client outcome, and settling five cases.

Our UC attorneys are unique in Pennsylvania. They will appeal cases to Commonwealth Court when they did not represent the client at their administrative hearing. This practice ensures access to justice for claimants with very difficult cases.

The **UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION UNIT (UC)** offers critical support to workers facing financial instability by guiding them through complex public benefits systems. The team assists clients in understanding and navigating the unemployment compensation process, ensuring they receive the benefits to which they are entitled during periods of joblessness. This is a huge help to low-income families as unemployment compensation is an earned benefit and being unable to gain or maintain access to those benefits can mean struggling with economic instability and poverty.



*Keeping People*

**FINANCIALY STABLE**



243  
Number of clients in 2024

45  
Number of clients who were able to obtain a refund

Mr. A's case is a good example of how taxpayer support can help a client achieve stability. Mr. A, a single father, came to the clinic in late 2021 after the IRS audited his 2020 tax return, Mr. A's claim for his dependent children was disallowed and the IRS withheld his \$11,000 refund. Despite his attempts to resolve the issue on his own and with the Taxpayer Advocate Service, he was unsuccessful. The clinic helped him gather necessary documents, including birth certificates and a residency letter from his sons' doctor, but the IRS failed to process the submitted documents. After persistent follow-ups, the clinic obtained another doctor's letter that met IRS requirements, prepared an amended tax return, and submitted an audit reconsideration request in March 2024. In early May, the IRS unexpectedly granted the request, allowing all refundable credits and releasing Mr. A's refund within days. By the end of May, he received over \$12,000, including nearly \$1,900 in interest. Without the clinic's assistance, it is unlikely Mr. A would have successfully recovered his refund. This money, which Mr. A was entitled to, is critical in helping him care for his family as a single parent.

The **TAXPAYER SUPPORT CLINIC** aids individuals struggling with federal tax issues, including disputes with the IRS, worker misclassification, and other income tax-related challenges. By providing legal representation and advice, the clinic helps taxpayers resolve their issues and achieve financial compliance and stability.

\$69,472.89  
Total amount of tax debt reduced or forgiven



# *Navigating* INCOME TAX COMPLICATIONS

## SMALL BUT *Mighty*

Our **GENERAL INTAKE UNIT** supports people with legal issues outside of our established priority areas by coming up with creative solutions, preparing cases to be received by PLA attorneys, or referring clients to services outside our scope of expertise. Our General Intake Unit handles calls about bankruptcy, debt collection, securing birth certificates, name changes, and raising estates, in addition to handling and fielding unemployment compensation calls. Our General Intake Unit 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 consists of only two paralegals and a part-time attorney, but they are able to accomplish a large volume of diverse client assistance.

5,447  
Number of calls received by the general intake unit

1,413  
Number of referrals made to other organizations

180  
Number of calls referred within the organization and handled by PLA staff





# In the Field WITH FARMWORKERS

Serving farmworkers across Pennsylvania, the **PENNSYLVANIA FARMWORKER PROJECT (PFP)** advocates for workplace safety, including safety from sexual harassment, fair wages, and adequate health standards. The team provides legal assistance to agricultural workers with legal status to work in the US, many of whom are working in the United States under H2-A visas, ensuring their rights are protected and promoting equitable working conditions. The team travels across the state to talk with farmworkers and provide critical information and resources in their outreach work.

The PFP interfaces with hundreds of farmworkers every year doing outreach across the state.

**38**  
Number of migrant farmworkers  
represented in 2024

**27**  
Number of outreach events at  
farms or agricultural sites

In 2024, the PFP launched a vital resource guide in Spanish to combat sexual harassment and violence in the agricultural industry. The booklet, titled "Protect Yourself from Harassment in Agricultural Work," explains what constitutes workplace sexual harassment and outlines steps to take if you are harassed. It also provides valuable resources for counseling and legal assistance in Pennsylvania.

For several months, the PFP team collaborated with local artist Cristina Arancibia Brecht, whose creativity brought this project to life. Additionally, the team consulted numerous advocates across the state for their expert advice and guidance on the content.

A link to the guide online can be found here: [bit.ly/PFP123](https://bit.ly/PFP123)



# 2024 FINANCIALS

**\$10,495,418** Revenue

**\$9,847,520** Expenses

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| Esperanza Health Center  | of Labor & Industry        | Philadelphia Foundation  |                            |
| Independence Foundation  | Pennsylvania IOLTA Board   |                          |                            |



With clear purpose  
and strong resolve,  
we're proud to stand  
alongside our clients  
and supporters as we  
use every resource  
available to work  
together toward a  
more just Philadelphia.



# Donors

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## *Mission*

**Philadelphia Legal Assistance** enforces and protects the rights of individuals and families by providing accessible, creative, and high-quality legal assistance and working collaboratively for systemic change. Since 1996, PLA has been the sole recipient of federal Legal Services Corporation funds in Philadelphia County. With a staff of 90+ individuals, PLA serves a culturally and linguistically diverse low-income constituency of 293,000 Philadelphia residents.





718 Arch Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

215-981-3800  
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LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION