

# COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES

ANNUAL REPORT 2019



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**OUR MISSION IS TO FIGHT POVERTY, CHALLENGE SYSTEMS THAT PERPETUATE INJUSTICE, AND CHANGE LIVES THROUGH CUTTING-EDGE ADVOCACY AND EXCEPTIONAL LEGAL REPRESENTATION.**

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"WORKING TOGETHER WITH OUR CLIENTS, WE ARE STRONG AND THE PASSION FOR OUR WORK KEEPS BURNING. IN MANY WAYS, THESE ARE TIMES OF STRIFE AND STRUGGLE, BUT WE WILL ALWAYS FIGHT FOR JUSTICE."

*DEBORAH L. FREEDMAN, ESQ. / EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR*

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As the Executive Director of Community Legal Services (CLS), I want to take a moment to thank you.

Your support has allowed us to continue to grow, as we provide exceptional legal representation to the people who need us now more than ever. This year, we served 12,000 individual clients, advocated for major systemic changes to fight poverty and injustice, and provided stellar community education to empower people to stand up for themselves.

In recent months, our clients, especially those that are immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals, have faced extraordinary threats to their lives and livelihoods. Our more than 50 years of legal expertise, as well as our focuses on racial justice and community building, have made us exceptionally well positioned to tackle these threats. Working together with our clients, we are strong and the passion for our work keeps burning.

In many ways, these are times of strife and struggle, but we will always fight for justice.

On the pages of this annual report, you will read about some of our important work. This year, we are focusing on ways that our units create and innovate, all with the goal of helping our clients more effectively. We are proud of our work and of the community we serve.

We thank you for making this work possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Debby Freedman'. The signature is stylized with a large 'D' and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**Debby Freedman**

*Executive Director*





# RACIAL JUSTICE AT COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES

CLS is committed to racial justice work. We pursue policies, beliefs, practices, attitudes, and actions that promote fair and equitable opportunity and treatment for marginalized populations.

We focus on how best to inform our work through a racial justice lens, making sure that all units at CLS are racial justice-informed. This diligence allows us to better serve our clients. Here are just three examples of this important work:

## **CLS'S HOUSING UNIT SEES THE EFFECTS OF INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM EVERY DAY AND ITS EFFECT ON OUR CLIENTS WHO ARE MAJORITY BLACK AND BROWN.**

Having a safe place to live is crucial, and many clients who are low income and barely getting by have to deal with the threat of housing insecurity. As neighborhoods become more desirable, long-term residents are displaced when they cannot afford rising rents. Gentrification mainly targets Black and Brown communities whose families have been in the neighborhood for generations, and it leads to eviction and displacement.

Our Housing Unit preserves affordability and prevents evictions so tenants are not displaced. The unit defends tenants, and has worked with the City of Philadelphia and City Council to take action to preserve properties before the threat of mass evictions. The Housing Unit serves as an advocate for our clients who have the cards stacked against them, so they are treated fairly in the court system. Our work not only helps people secure a safe place to live, but it also fights segregation.

## **OUR EMPLOYMENT UNIT ASSISTS PEOPLE WHO HAVE ENCOUNTERED THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.**

One in three Americans has a criminal record. Due to over-policing and the hyper-surveillance of predominately low-income Black neighborhoods, Black Americans are more likely to be arrested. Once a person is arrested, whether or not they have been convicted of a crime, their record is created and can be viewed by employers, landlords, schools, and more. If a person has a record, it is very difficult to move forward because they are shut out of almost all aspects of society. The Employment Unit assists over 1,000 Philadelphians with cleaning up their criminal record each year, and does systemic advocacy to help hundreds of thousands more individuals. This helps countless people, many of whom are Black and Brown, to overcome legal barriers to accessing employment, housing, and higher education.





**OUR HOMEOWNERSHIP AND CONSUMER RIGHTS UNIT WORKS TO PRESERVE THE FAMILY HOME.**

Many families in Philadelphia will inherit their homes from their parent and pass them on to their children. Intergenerational family homes are one way that low-income families can protect against rising property values in some parts of the city and avoid involuntary displacement. On

a national scale, the median Black household is estimated to have only one-twelfth of the wealth of a median white household, and the home typically makes up to two-thirds of household wealth. Home preservation is one of the strongest ways for families of color to build and maintain wealth. When we work to save homes, we bridge the wealth divide for Black and Brown families.



## BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

Each year since 1990, Community Legal Services has hosted the Breakfast of Champions, generously sponsored by the Philadelphia Trial Lawyers Association. At the event, we celebrate with law firms, individuals, and foundations that are dedicated to the cause of equal access to justice for all. Awards are presented to friends of CLS who demonstrate exceptional standards of service or innovation in ensuring access to justice. The Breakfast also recognizes law firms that give to CLS's Bar Campaign each year.



**KEYNOTE SPEAKER**  
CONGRESSWOMAN MARY GAY SCANLON

## 2019 EQUAL JUSTICE AWARDS



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# INNOVATION

CLS continually innovates effective new methods of helping our clients and community. Sometimes that means reimagining our systems. And sometimes that means creating new policies, programs, and technology from scratch.

## **PENNSYLVANIA'S NEW CLEAN SLATE LAW EPITOMIZES INNOVATION IN ACTION.**

Hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians are getting a second chance because of Clean Slate, the brainchild of CLS and the Center for American Progress. Clean Slate legislation passed in June 2018, creating the first automated sealing program for certain old and minor criminal records. Innovation powered every step in bringing Clean Slate to fruition, from dreaming up the idea, to uniting unlikely allies to support Clean Slate legislation, to implementing the cutting-edge technology to seal records automatically. Automated sealing went into effect in 2019, with more than 700,000 records sealed by November 2019, and more than 30 million cases are set to be sealed by June 2020. Now we are seeing the national impact of our innovation, as other states begin passing similar legislation.

## **RECOGNIZING THAT THE MOST EFFECTIVE LEGAL REPRESENTATION DOES NOT FOLLOW A STANDARDIZED FORMULA, CLS INNOVATES IN THE WAY WE SERVE CLIENTS.**

For example, our Youth Justice Project (YJP) serves young people who often face multiple complex, intersecting problems. Although CLS utilizes an advanced case management system, the YJP advocates envisioned an improved system for collecting and tracking information that is specific to youth cases, which are often more nuanced. Together with our Director of Law and Technology, the YJP team customized a new web-based tool that gives advocates a more comprehensive picture of youth clients' situations, making way for truly holistic representation tailored to youth. This technology also streamlines referrals to other agencies so that youth can get all the help they need without repeating the intake process. Because the new system captures more data about youth cases, YJP can better monitor trends and use this information to enhance our advocacy around youth-specific issues.





**CLS HAS ALSO BEEN USING GEOGRAPHICAL DATA ANALYSIS TO PINPOINT WHERE AND HOW WE CAN CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO MIGHT BE FACING PARTICULAR LEGAL PROBLEMS.** Our Homeownership and Consumer Rights Unit, together with partners, has developed a new method of evaluating data in order to better identify and reach seniors in rapidly gentrifying zip codes who could be struggling with their property taxes. We conduct direct outreach to these longtime homeowners, providing the critical legal help that can save their homes from foreclosure and get them into affordable payment agreements for their property taxes. This new data-driven approach has already reduced the number of seniors at risk of property tax foreclosure in these neighborhoods by 53%.

**CLS'S DYNAMIC PARTNERSHIPS CONSISTENTLY SPARK INNOVATION, LEADING TO BOLD, COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES.** This year, CLS and Regional Housing Legal Services (RHLS) launched a project to tackle mass evictions using a pioneering approach. Mass evictions occur

most often when building owners take action to empty properties that house lower-income people in hopes of renovating and collecting higher rents. With generous support from the Barra Foundation Catalyst Fund, CLS and RHLS are working to proactively identify buildings that may be at risk of mass evictions so that we can intervene before they occur, dramatically expanding tenants' options. We then plan to work alongside both building owners and tenants to explore alternative new models of building ownership, such as tenant co-operatives, that preserve affordability and prevent displacement. CLS's experience working with tenants, combined with RHLS's expertise on the ownership side, make this a powerful partnership with the potential to introduce groundbreaking models of building ownership to Philadelphia.

**CLS IS DEDICATED NOT ONLY TO ASKING "WHAT'S NEXT?" BUT ALSO TO FIGURING IT OUT.** Our advocates' innovative spirit and steadfast commitment to our clients continually lead to new ideas that strengthen our community.



# JUSTICE THROUGH GENERATIONS

CLS's work empowers Philadelphians across generations who are seeking justice. From families with small children to older adults, and everyone in between, CLS provides legal assistance to lift people out of poverty and help them live with safety, health, and dignity. Here are just some of the targeted services we provide:

## **SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES WITH BABIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN**

- We obtain income support and public benefits, including WIC and SNAP (food stamps) for mothers of infants, so they can care for their babies.
- We help young children with disabilities, especially behavioral health issues and autism, get SSI benefits so they can be nurtured and supported.
- When children are placed in foster care, we help parents reunite their families and avoid lengthy foster care stays for their kids.
- We advocate for children who must be separated from their parents to be placed with family in kinship care instead of foster care.
- We keep children safe from lead, mold, and pests by improving substandard housing conditions.
- We assist parents of newborns in exercising their rights when they face pregnancy discrimination or problems accessing family leave at work.

## **JUSTICE AND STABILITY FOR TEENAGERS AND OLDER YOUTH**

- We provide support for teen parents, including connecting them with cash assistance and food stamps, so they can maintain homes with their children.
- We help youth transitioning out of foster care connect with resources, such as housing and disability income.
- We open doors to education and employment for youth by breaking down barriers caused by juvenile and criminal records.
- We provide holistic services for youth experiencing homelessness so they can get back on their feet.
- When teens who are involved in the child welfare system are parenting, we advocate for them to be able to keep their babies with them whenever possible, or for their babies to be placed with a trusted family member if out-of-home placement is needed.





### **OPPORTUNITY AND INDEPENDENCE FOR WORKING FAMILIES AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

- We fight wage theft and worker exploitation so people can take home the money they have earned.
- We clear criminal records through expungements, sealing, and pardons, so people can access jobs, housing, education, and other opportunities.
- We prevent homelessness and displacement by fighting eviction and mortgage foreclosure.
- We work with people with disabilities and families to gain access to and maintain cash assistance, SNAP (food stamps), LIHEAP heat assistance, SSI, and Medicaid.
- We advocate for energy affordability and help people maintain their electricity, gas, and water service.
- We help survivors of domestic violence and assault maintain safe housing.

### **SAFETY AND DIGNITY FOR OLDER ADULTS**

- We help seniors preserve their homes by preventing property tax foreclosure.
- We advocate for older adults who want to stay in their homes and communities by getting them in-home supports and services.
- We prevent wrongful nursing home discharges and guardianships.
- We preserve essential Social Security benefits.
- We help older adults access needed medical care by resolving problems with Medicaid and Medicare.
- We assist older adults who are caring for grandchildren in accessing supportive benefits for their grandchildren including Medicaid, SNAP and cash assistance.
- We preserve family homes for relatives who have lived with and provided needed care for older adults.



CLS houses a wide range of legal expertise. With ten different legal units and projects, CLS advocates often collaborate to solve clients' complex and intersecting problems.

**HEALTH AND INDEPENDENCE UNIT** represents seniors, people with disabilities, families with children, immigrants, survivors of domestic violence, and other individuals and families in a wide range of health and public benefits issues, including problems getting or keeping Medicaid (including Emergency Medicaid), Medicare, Cash Assistance, SNAP/Food Stamps, LIHEAP, WIC, and Child Care Subsidy. The unit also challenges decisions by managed care organizations to deny care, especially home and community-based services; violations of residents' rights, involuntary discharges, and quality of care requirements in nursing homes and personal care homes; and fights to prevent unnecessary guardianships or violations of the rights of persons who have guardians.

**EMPLOYMENT UNIT** represents clients with employment-related problems, including tackling barriers to employment, seeking unpaid wages, and preserving jobs. The unit advocates at the national and state levels on low-income workers' rights issues, such as preventing overly broad disqualifications of workers with criminal records.

**ENERGY UNIT** advocates so that people have access to affordable water, heat, and electricity in their homes. Through direct legal representation, policy advocacy, and pushing for legislation to improve energy affordability, our cutting-edge work promotes health and safety in Philadelphia and across Pennsylvania.





**FAMILY ADVOCACY UNIT** provides high quality interdisciplinary legal representation to parents in Philadelphia dependency proceedings, with the goal of strengthening families and keeping children safely at home. The FAU model incorporates direct representation, community outreach and education, and systemic legislative and policy advocacy for families involved in the child welfare system.

**HOMEOWNERSHIP AND CONSUMER RIGHTS UNIT** represents homeowners facing mortgage and tax foreclosures, and pursues economic justice on behalf of clients facing fraudulent consumer practices, abusive debt collection, and a variety of consumer scams affecting low-income families. The unit is heavily litigation-focused, but also advocates with city, state, and federal agencies for more consumer-friendly policies and laws.

**HOUSING UNIT** provides high volume individual representation for low-income tenants facing imminent eviction and homelessness. Closely tied to eviction defense are issues of repairs, termination of housing subsidies, reasonable accommodation for disabilities, criminal record barriers to housing, rent calculations, domestic violence and sexual assault. Based upon work in these individual cases, the Housing Unit works to create systemic change through impact litigation, legislative advocacy and community education and outreach, focusing on habitability of rental housing, right to counsel, service of process, reasonable accommodations, preservation of affordable housing, criminal records barriers to housing, and the intersection of housing and domestic violence and sexual assault.

**SSI UNIT** provides holistic support, including legal representation and social work, to people with serious disabilities who need SSI, an income support from the Social Security Administration. The unit also advocates at the local, state, and national levels for policies and practices that make life better for people with disabilities, with a particular focus on children and youth.

**LANGUAGE ACCESS PROJECT** works to ensure CLS services are available to Philadelphia communities with limited ability to speak, read, write, or understand English. The project addresses legal issues specific to this population and collaborates with other units to represent individuals and families in challenging language barriers to benefits, services, and access to justice.

**MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP (MLP)** embeds legal advocates within health care practices to address health-harming legal issues such as lack of heat, unstable housing, or food insecurity. CLS has MLPs at Rising Sun Health Center, which serves a diverse immigrant population, and CHOP Karabots Pediatric Care Center, which treats more than 35,000 children each year. At the MLPs, CLS advocates work alongside health care team members to prevent or resolve legal issues.

**YOUTH JUSTICE PROJECT** provides holistic representation and engages in community-based outreach and advocacy to ensure that low-income young people transitioning to adulthood are able to connect to the services they need to gain stability and access opportunity. YJP has a particular focus on working with youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, parenting youth, and youth with disabilities who have been involved with the juvenile, criminal, child welfare, or shelter systems and are more likely to face multiple intersecting legal issues as a result.



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RIGHT TO COUNSEL LEGISLATION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY IN PHILADELPHIA CITY COUNCIL THIS YEAR. THIS BILL GUARANTEES LOW-INCOME TENANTS AN ATTORNEY IN EVICTION CASES AND IS A CRITICAL STEP TOWARDS STABILIZING COMMUNITIES, STEMMING THE EFFECTS OF GENTRIFICATION, AND ADDRESSING THE SYSTEMIC RACISM & HOUSING DISCRIMINATION IN PHILADELPHIA.

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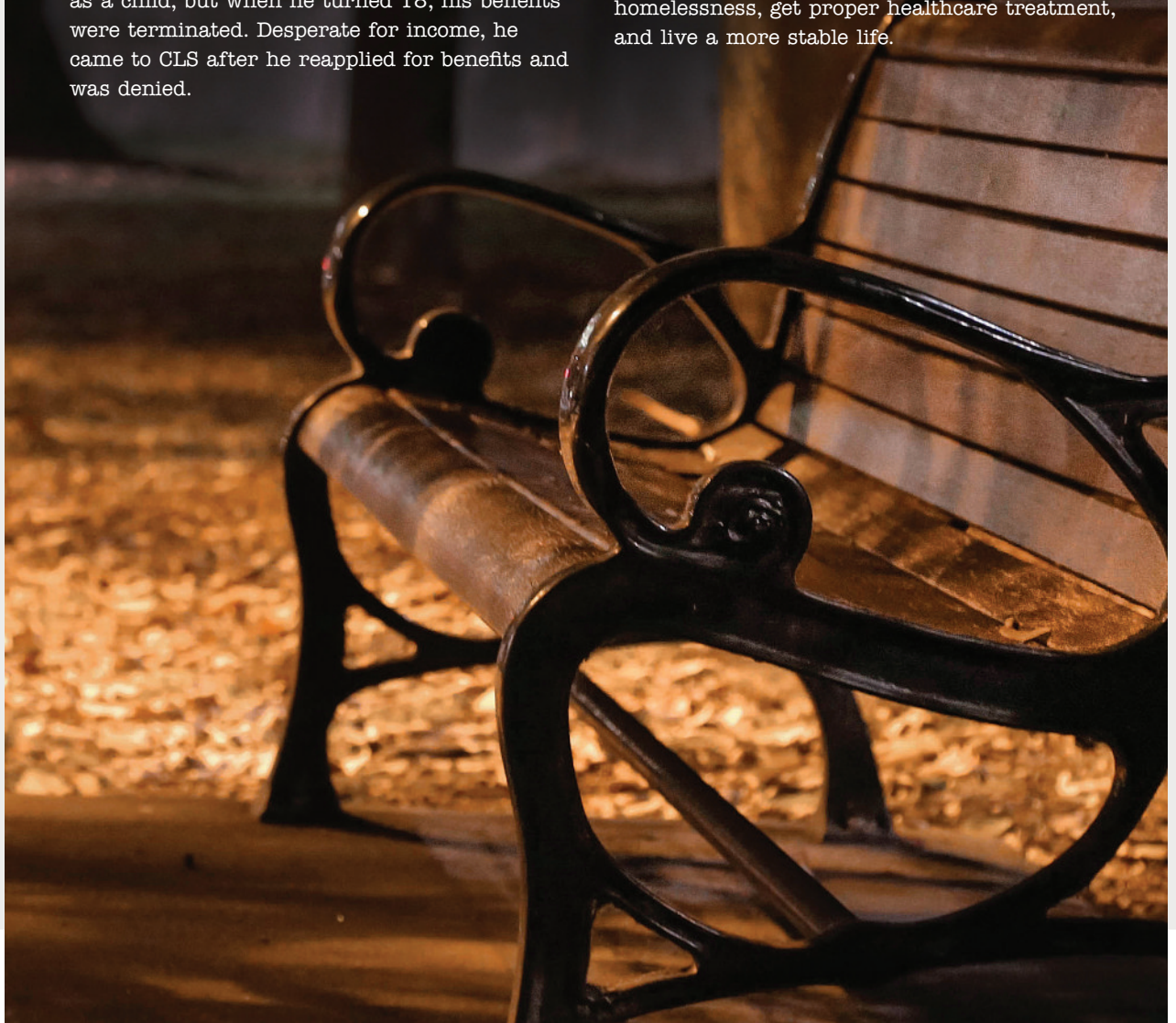


Sean Mitchell has been homeless since he was sixteen years old. He is transgender, and his home became unsafe when his family did not understand his gender identity.

Estranged from his family, he had nowhere to go and was living on the streets. Quickly, his health started deteriorating. With no money, he could not afford to eat and was rapidly losing weight.

Sean also has a series of mental health issues. As a child, he was diagnosed with Bipolar Depression Disorder, Anxiety, and Autism. As an adult living with serious health issues and no one to take care of him, simple life tasks became nearly impossible. Suffering with depression, he has a hard time getting out of bed, feeding himself, and bathing himself. Sean had no consistent home, and being homeless was a huge strain on his mental and physical health. He received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as a child, but when he turned 18, his benefits were terminated. Desperate for income, he came to CLS after he reapplied for benefits and was denied.

CLS Youth Justice Project and SSI Unit attorney Kee Tobar worked diligently on Sean's case. She had to prove that Sean's mental and physical health issues had not improved since childhood and were preventing him from working. Even though Sean's homelessness prevented him from getting consistent medical care, Kee was able to obtain his medical records and present a strong case. At the hearing, the judge found that Sean's ability to understand, remember, and apply information was limited. Kee convinced the court to date his case back to 2016 when he was originally denied benefits and should have been found eligible. Ultimately, the judge restored Sean's SSI and gave him 42 months in back benefits. For Sean, this was life-changing. Now he has the money to transition out of homelessness, get proper healthcare treatment, and live a more stable life.





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A background image showing a person's legs from the knees down, wearing blue jeans and bright red sneakers with white soles. They are walking on a dark, textured pavement. The image is slightly blurred, giving a sense of motion.

## Mary Stanley lost all of her utility services after her landlord tried to illegally evict her by cutting off her electricity, gas, and water.

To make matters even worse, she became involved with the child welfare system after someone reported her to the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) for living without utilities. Ms. Stanley was at risk of losing her 13-year-old son.

DHS informed Ms. Stanley that, if she was not able to get her utilities back on, they might have to remove her son from her care on an emergency basis.


Struggling to survive without utilities, and desperate to keep her son at home, Ms. Stanley came to CLS for help. Fortunately, CLS has expertise in multiple areas of the law and put together a team to fight for her rights.

Ms. Stanley explained to her advocates that her landlord had shut off all of her utilities in an effort to illegally evict her from her apartment. CLS Energy Unit attorney Rob Ballenger called PECO to request an

inspection by a field services technician, who discovered that Ms. Stanley's landlord did interfere with her electricity. The landlord had also managed to shut off the water supply connected to the water heater and shut off the gas inside the house. After some technical maneuvering, her water was restored and Rob successfully advocated for PECO to restore her electricity immediately. Rob also contacted PGW to send a technician to inspect and turn on her gas.

CLS Family Advocacy Unit attorney Beth Larin reached out to DHS who informed Beth that they would not remove Ms. Stanley's child, in light of her reobtaining utility service. This was a big relief for Ms. Stanley and now she can focus on raising her teenage son. Ms. Stanley told CLS that she is "grateful to know that there are people like you guys out there helping people defend themselves and reestablish basic human rights."



A close-up, vertical photograph of a person's torso and arms. They are wearing a light blue denim jacket over a dark blue shirt and light blue jeans. They are holding a stack of books and a purple folder. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor scene with a path and trees.

Melissa Smith was thriving. A single mom to a baby boy, Melissa was working toward a career in nursing and enjoying her studies at Community College of Philadelphia.

When her baby's father began paying more child support, Melissa realized she no longer needed TANF cash assistance, and voluntarily withdrew from the program.

Unexpectedly, this triggered a series of harmful events that put Melissa's education in jeopardy. Melissa was inexplicably cut off from the Medical Assistance (Medicaid) program that helped her and her baby son stay healthy. To make matters worse, Melissa was dropped from the CCIS program, the childcare subsidy that allowed her to attend classes, because her CCIS eligibility was linked to her receipt of TANF. Without CCIS, Melissa would have nowhere for her baby to go while she was in school. She was heartbroken, thinking she would have to drop out.

Luckily, Melissa's fears were relieved when she found legal help at school. CLS partners with Single Stop at Community College of Philadelphia to offer on-site legal clinics for students. When Melissa lost her medical coverage and CCIS, a CLS lawyer was there to take the case.

CLS public benefits expert Maria Pulzetti advocated with the welfare office to get Melissa's and her baby's Medical Assistance immediately reinstated without a lapse in coverage.

Maria also found a way for Melissa to participate in CCIS through SNAP (food stamps), so she could afford childcare for her son. Melissa was relieved that she was able to access childcare, writing to Maria, "I'm grateful because I can now focus on my studies."



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Mr. Michael C. Juza

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*In Memory of Claudia Goodman*  
Harold I. Goodman, Esq.

*In Memory of William R. Klaus*  
James D. Epstein, Esq. and  
Mr. Thomas Hess

*In Memory of Tom P. Monteverde*  
Dennis R. Suplee, Esq., and  
Patricia H. Suplee

*In Memory of Arthur R. G. Solmssen Jr*  
Mr. Robert Solmssen

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CLS SUCCESSFULLY ADVOCATED WITH THE PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION TO LOWER ITS ENERGY BURDEN FOR LOW-INCOME PENNSYLVANIANS. WHEN FULLY IMPLEMENTED, PENNSYLVANIANS WHO ARE STRUGGLING TO GET BY WILL PAY AS LITTLE AS 6% PERCENT OF THEIR INCOME FOR UTILITY SERVICE, INSTEAD OF THE 17% THE COMMISSION PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED AFFORDABLE. THIS WILL KEEP COMMUNITIES MUCH HEALTHIER AND SAFER, AS MORE PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO ACCESS THE ENERGY THEY DESPERATELY NEED.

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*In Memory of Mike Trister*  
Ellen Josephson Vargyas, Esq.

*In Memory of Yunja Yu*  
Kay Kyungsun Yu, Esq.

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and Justice  
United Way of Greater Philadelphia  
and Southern New Jersey  
WOMEN'S WAY  
The Zell Family Foundation



# FINANCIALS

JULY 1, 2018—JUNE 30, 2019

<b>REVENUE &amp; OTHER SUPPORT:</b>	
CONTRACTS & GRANTS	\$11,032,269
CONTRIBUTIONS	\$3,517,440
ATTORNEY FEES	\$133,732
INTEREST INCOME	\$63,442
OTHER INCOME	\$4,812
<b>SUBTOTAL REVENUE</b>	<b>\$14,751,695</b>
<b>EXPENSES:</b>	
PROGRAM SERVICES	\$11,588,960
MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL	\$1,065,203
FUNDRAISING	\$457,601
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$13,111,764</b>
CHANGE IN ASSETS	\$1,639,931
NET ASSETS	
BEGINNING OF YEAR	\$12,980,315
<b>END OF YEAR</b>	<b>\$14,620,246</b>

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ANNUAL REPORT 2019



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