



COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES OF PHILADELPHIA

ANNUAL REPORT
FISCAL YEAR 2021



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

This year, we have started to see glimpses of a post-pandemic world, but in so many ways, life is not back to normal for our clients. The pandemic continues to impact every area of CLS's work because it has affected our community so deeply.

I am incredibly proud of the way our advocates have tackled the challenges brought on by the pandemic. The tenacious, innovative spirit of CLS has never been more evident, from the way our advocates have gone above and beyond to serve clients to the new policies and programs we have created.

The commitment and partnership of our supporters have propelled this work. You have stepped up with us, showing our community that we will continue to fight for justice together.

Your support has allowed us to respond to urgent client needs during the pandemic and pioneer brand new areas of legal work. In the pages of this report, you will read about CLS's groundbreaking efforts to prevent eviction in the face of the pandemic. You will read about our Employment Unit advocates growing into Unemployment Compensation experts. We have also amplified our work around racial justice, taking concrete steps to center racial justice in our advocacy, individual representation, and operations.

As the pandemic unfolds and our clients' needs evolve, so does our response. We are finding opportunities to expand and strengthen our advocacy so that our clients can continue to recover, with the legal protections that keep them safe, healthy, and housed.

Because of our supporters, CLS will be there to fight for our clients and to challenge and change unjust systems. We could not do this work without you. Thank you for standing with us through the toughest of times.

Sincerely,



Debby Freedman
Executive Director

2

Message from
the Director

3

CLS Responds
to the Pandemic

4

Breakfast of Champions
& Bar Campaign

6

Legal Units

8

Donors Make
Justice Possible

9

Crisis of Imagination

12

Black Survival
Is Black History

14

Breaking Barriers to
Employment

18

Keeping People Safe
& In Their Homes

23

Financials

23

Board of Directors

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

JUSTICE IN A CRISIS: CLS RESPONDS TO THE COVID PANDEMIC

CLS clients have been devastated by the COVID pandemic, facing job loss, hunger, cold, and the risk of homelessness. CLS advocates jumped in to fight for justice and ensure Philadelphia families can survive this crisis. CLS's legal representation, high-impact litigation, targeted media, community education, and policy advocacy helped ensure that complex systems work for struggling families.

SOME OF OUR IMPORTANT SUCCESSIONS DURING 2021 INCLUDE:

- Advocating for and implementing Philadelphia's new eviction diversion program, which prevents homelessness
- Advocating for moratoriums on evictions, foreclosures, and utility shutoffs, keeping people safely in their homes.
- Getting water, gas, and electric service restored for households who were shut off, so they would have life-essential utilities during the stay-at-home order.
- Ensuring access to Medicaid and SNAP, so people can maintain health insurance and food through the pandemic.
- Advocating for the expansion of Philadelphia's sick leave law to protect workers' health and safety.
- Working with PA officials to release more than \$50 million in Pandemic Unemployment Assistance for clients who lost their jobs.

HIGH-IMPACT LITIGATION: FIGHTING HUNGER AND ENSURING ACCESS TO BENEFITS

When our clients faced unjust federal laws that denied their families critical income, CLS worked with co-counsel to litigate for change.

CLS and Morgan Lewis sued the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for excluding the lowest-income families from receiving emergency SNAP allotments (food stamps). The pandemic has made it even harder for low-income people to safely and affordably access food, and the USDA's unlawful position denied help to families who were most in danger of going hungry. In March 2021, they reached a settlement that delivered \$712 million emergency SNAP benefits to approximately 650,000 PA households! In addition, the USDA changed their national policy so that approximately 12 million families nationwide were able to get the additional SNAP benefits they were owed.

CLS, Berger Montague, and the Villanova Federal Tax Law Clinic teamed up to sue the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for making stimulus payments inaccessible to people with disabilities and their children. As a result of the litigation, the IRS reversed its national policy and agreed to give SSI and Social Security recipients more time to apply for payments, which will help approximately 250,000 families across the nation maintain stability during the pandemic.

A TRUSTED RESOURCE FOR OUR NEIGHBORS

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Philadelphians have been desperate for information about new laws and programs and how to get help. We have responded with a constant stream of up to date information.

During the pandemic, our website has received more than 1,117,000 views, many on pages related to COVID-19. Additionally, we have done more than 250 community education sessions and trainings for other advocates, so that people know their rights and resources available to them.

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

Each year since 1990, CLS 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 justice and equity. 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.



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LEGAL UNITS

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.

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, state, and local 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 legislative campaigns 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.

HEALTH & 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.

HOMEOWNERSHIP & 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 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. The Housing Unit focuses 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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Attorney in the
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CRISIS OF IF IMAGINATION

Poem by April Lee, CLS Director of Client Voice

We are in a crisis that goes unseen. A crisis that a person can be in and still not see.

Something happens to a person when they are stripped of their imagination of self. Not being able to see their true value but, see value in everyone else.

I have been in the position of, not being able to see hope. I have been in the position where, I lacked the imagination to cope. Imagination is needed to see yourself moving forward. I use imagination everyday as I raise my Sons and Daughter.

These oppressive systems can wear you down to the point that you are just a nub of yourself. Systems that force you to put things like hope, love, justice, and self-acceptance on a shelf.

What happens when a person lives in a prison with no walls, no doors, and virtually no way out? They live in a world riddled with self-doubt.

These systems were constructed to condition people like Pavlov's dog; when they whistle you submit.

Submit to, not being able to go farther. Submit, that your children will be without Mothers and Fathers. Submit, that you are not enough. Submit, that you should just give up. Submit, that you are less than Human. Submit, that you don't have the same rights of the next man.

This Ghetto mindset was manufactured just for you, from like minds that rival that of Hitler's. Manufactured for you to take two steps forward: while taking ten steps back just to leave you bitter.

Removing the Nazi and replacing them with Police. Removing your voice so, that all you can say is "No justice No peace."

Removing the gas chambers and replacing them with bars. Removing the brute-force and replacing it with policies that makes you forget who you are.

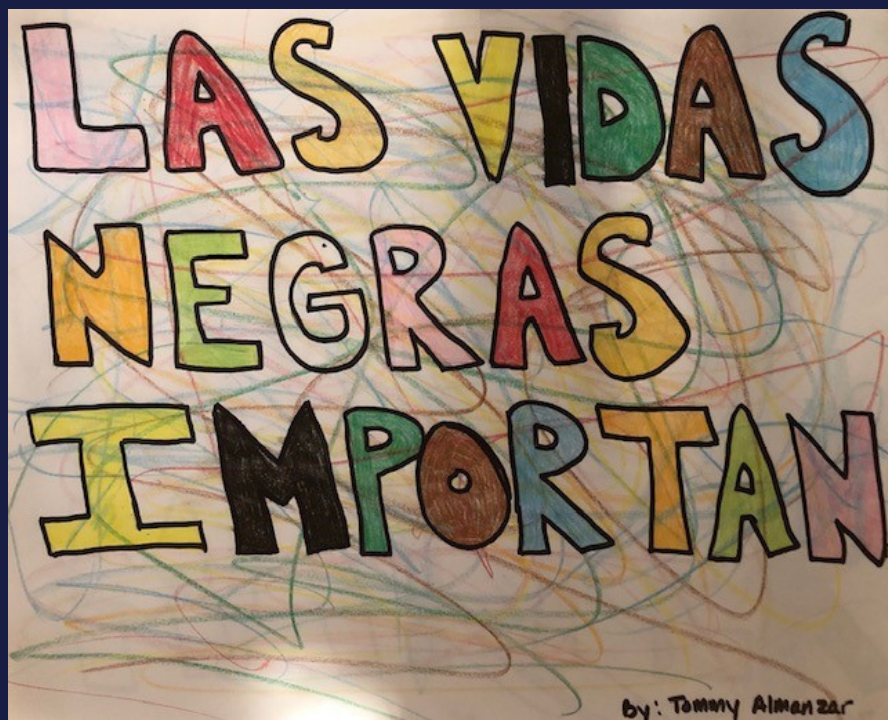
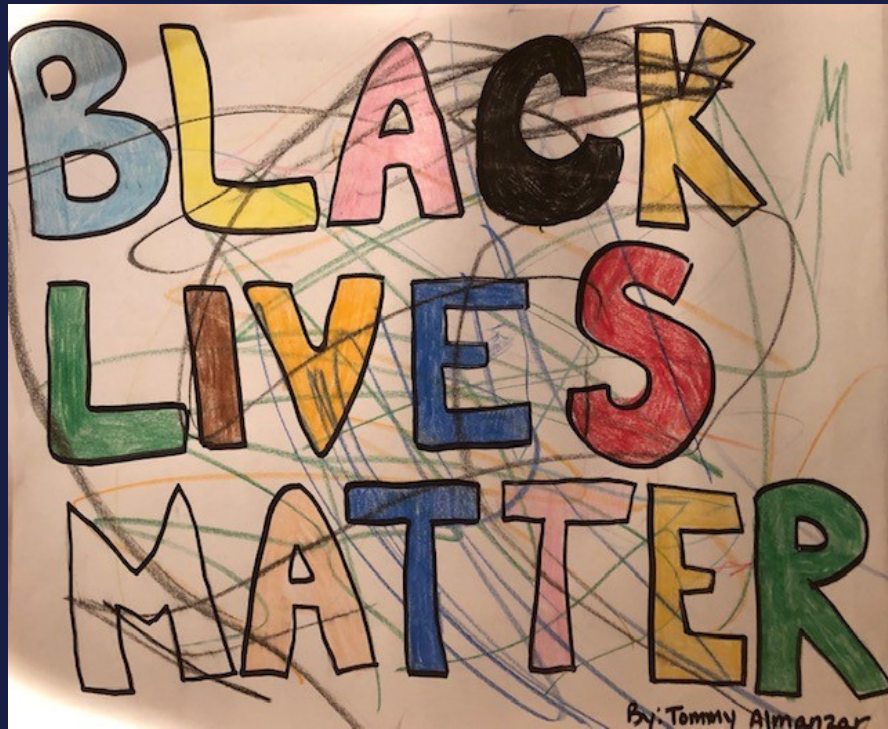
In this crisis of Imagination, we forget that, our mind is the one thing that can't be taken from us. Yet, we allow it to be pinned down into submission until we just give up.

I tell you now, that there is a way out of this crisis of imagination. Even within a democracy/dictatorship Nation.

It starts by contradicting everything you were conditioned to believe. Especially the part that tells you, that you will always be stuck and never to be relieved.

I am about to tell you something, that some don't want you to know. The prison you are in, is not a prison and you are free to go!

On your way out, don't forget to pick up your imagination of self; and leave behind things like self-doubt, despair, and inability on the self.



*Art courtesy of Nadeen Almanzar,
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BLACK SURVIVAL IS BLACK HISTORY

The following was written by Kee Tobar, CLS Director of Race Equity & Inclusion, for Black History Month 2021

Not too long ago I was asked for an elevator pitch concerning what Community Legal Services does within a racial justice context. At first it was hard to condense the many things we do into an elevator pitch. After all, we help Black mothers clear their names from child abuse registries that judge a Black mother's care for her child by her race, zip code, and financial status. We help Black people keep their homes in a city where "we buy homes" signs are as prevalent in Black communities as Eagles fans. We help clear employment obstacles such as minor records, so that disproportionately impacted Black people have a fair shot at securing employment. We do so many things, but by the end of the conversation, it dawned on me that the core of what we do is help the most marginalized Black

and Brown people survive. We help people live to fight for another possibility to thrive. This has been especially true during this pandemic. Public benefits, tenants' rights, disability justice, helping with unemployment compensation and wage theft, family law, the medical legal partnership, it is all about helping the most vulnerable people within the Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) community survive, and survive with some semblance of dignity.

Often it is only us and our legal arguments that stand between swaths of the most vulnerable people of color and our carnivorous institutions and systems that feast on Black bodies. In a country where Black people feel hunted and unsafe, we fight tooth and nail for our clients'

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access to safety net programs. These programs often provide the most basic protection from the potential social catastrophes that stem from being Black, hungry, and houseless during a pandemic, amid feverous social unrest.

At our best and most opportune moments, we help Black people thrive. We create policies that may change employment opportunities for generations of Black people, including policies like Clean Slate. We protect Black wealth by protecting disproportionately affected Black homeowners from exorbitant property taxes, tangled titles, and tax liens. We help Black entrepreneurs and trade employees obtain licenses in higher earning trade jobs by disrupting unnecessary obstacles to licensure through policy change. In those moments, we are able to go beyond survival, but a hard truth is that many of our clients come to us when they can no longer breathe. Our day-to-day work consists of helping Black people stand up to systems that have had their proverbial knee on

their neck for lifetimes. Often, we must play the role not of the vanguard, but of the last line of defense for many Black Philadelphians.

To be clear, this essay is not written to say that the lawyers, paralegals, social workers, and administrative staff at Community Legal Services are Black people's saviors. Black people have an enduring legacy of saving themselves in this country since 1619. Black Philadelphians follow in that legacy. Also, the white supremacy structures within the legal practice would never allow us to be a savior. However, we are the partners at the end of the road, that stand beside them and uplift their voices as they make one of the most remarkable Black histories, which is their survival story. This is who we are as Community Legal Services of Philadelphia. This is our promise to you; to keep fighting alongside you, to keep uplifting your voice, to continue being your partner in our combined pursuit for justice, fairness, and equity for all.

BREAKING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Tackling the Challenges of the Pandemic and Beyond

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Employment Unit at CLS has helped thousands of Philadelphians access Unemployment Compensation and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, as well as defend workers' rights to paid leave and safe working conditions. At a time when ideas of employment and security have been upended, CLS's lawyers and paralegals have stayed the course and continued the excellent representation and advocacy that have always defined the Employment Unit's work.

This vital commitment to relieving the pressures of the pandemic for our clients has been matched this past year by the continued drive to break down barriers to employment. The unemployment benefits we fight for are temporary; the strength of our collective recovery will depend on eliminating bureaucratic red-tape and dismantling racist policies that hold so many back from participating fully in the working economy.

Over a year of advocacy paid off in June 2020 when the state legislature passed an Occupational Licensing Reform bill that gets rid of outdated criminal record restrictions that disproportionately blocked Black and Brown workers out of career opportunities in fields like nursing and cosmetology. Our lawyers lobbied, met with legislative and administrative staff, drafted and revised language, and reached out to stakeholders in order to pass Occupational Licensing Reform. Under the new law, a conviction must be related to the occupation in order to be disqualifying, and even then, license applicants will have an opportunity to prove that they are fit to serve in that field.

CLS's Youth Justice Project team also successfully advocated with the PA State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) to change their policy of screening college applicants based on criminal record. After years of advocacy alongside our grassroots and national partners, PASSHE recently announced they will no longer inquire about records on their application, an initiative that is part of their commitment to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the state school system. Occupational Licensing Reform and PASSHE's new policy will help thousands of Pennsylvanians find meaningful careers and join in the economic recovery from the pandemic.

CLS continues to build on and expand the impact of Pennsylvania's Clean Slate Law, which seals old and minor criminal records using automation. One of the largest barriers to our clients benefitting from Clean Slate was that many owe court fines and costs on their cases, which made them illegible for sealing. CLS was able to advocate for an amendment to the law so that owing criminal court debt is no longer a barrier to record sealing. Since that amendment went into effect, 40 million cases and 61 million offenses have been sealed as of November 2021. Now, CLS is advocating for Clean Slate to be expanded to allow sealing of drug felony convictions, a critical policy to combat the harmful impact of the war on drugs and the opioid epidemic.

In addition to our cutting-edge criminal records advocacy, CLS is at the forefront of the fight against barriers to employment caused by being placed on the child abuse registry. Similar to an arrest record, parents and child care workers are placed on the child abuse registry because of a mere allegation of abuse and neglect. Many of our clients are placed on the registry for circumstances like missing medical appointments, having difficulty caring for medically needy children, or being blamed for accidents that happen in the home. They are not automatically provided with a hearing or opportunity to be heard, but rather must appeal within a short time frame to get off the registry. When able to appeal, the vast majority of people end up being able to get their records expunged. But those who do not have notice or are unable to navigate the appeals system can end up being labeled a “child abuser” for life.

In 2021, CLS released a report detailing the harms the child abuse registry causes to low-wage workers, and in particular Black and Brown women, who are the most likely to be working in fields that run child abuse clearances, such as child care and health care. The report called for significant changes to the registry, including providing hearings before individuals are placed on the registry and creating a tiered system so that individuals accused of missing medical appointments are not treated the same way as people accused of sexual abuse. These calls for reform are now acting as a catalyst for legislative change. We will keep pushing forward to dismantle this unjust system that destabilizes families and makes it harder for them to provide for their children.

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CLS INNOVATES POLICIES AND PROGRAMS THAT KEEP PEOPLE SAFE AND IN THEIR HOMES

CLS housing unit has expanded its program design and systems change capacity to fundamentally alter the eviction landscape in Philadelphia. Our groundbreaking strategy combines three interconnected solutions – eviction diversion, eviction records protections, and right to counsel for tenants. Together, these three solutions challenge the current eviction system and increase access to housing opportunities for low-income Philadelphians facing rental housing insecurity. Each of the three components of this project are groundbreaking initiatives on their own, and until now they have not before been done as compliments to each other.

Often, people end up in eviction court over money or relationship issues. The Eviction Diversion program intervenes in these eviction cases that can be resolved with some discussion away from the court process. By diverting cases out of court and offering a supportive process that emphasizes communication and resolution, more than 90% of landlords and tenants reach a resolution before the point of eviction. In this way, Eviction Diversion leads to stabilization rather than litigation and disruptive displacement. Tenants who are able to resolve their issues through a pre-filing diversion program also avoid a mark on their record that is harmful to their future housing options.

During the height of the pandemic, CLS housing advocates pushed to make Eviction Diversion mandatory for all eviction cases brought to court for non-payment of rent. This intervention allowed families whose economic stability was undermined by the effects of the pandemic to reach a resolution with their landlords, rather than face eviction or homelessness before they could get back on their feet. Part of the diversion mandate also required landlords to apply for rental assistance on behalf of their tenants. This is one of the reasons Philadelphia was able to effectively distribute almost all of the federal rental assistance funding. The Eviction Diversion Program was so successful in preventing evictions that Philadelphia was highlighted as a national model by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

CLS also championed the groundbreaking Renters' Access Act, which prevents landlords from discriminating against potential tenants based on eviction records and credit scores alone. Once an eviction is filed against someone in Philadelphia, that record can be seen by all future landlords, even in situations where the parties were able to resolve the case in court, where the tenant won, or where the case was withdrawn. These records can have an adverse effect on tenants when landlords have blanket bans on renting to people with eviction records. The Renters' Access Act is an anti-discrimination and race equity tool that will give thousands of renters a better chance of securing safe, stable housing, particularly as they recover from the pandemic.

After becoming the fourth city in the country to win a right to counsel for tenants in 2019, CLS and partners in the Philadelphia Eviction Prevention Project are gearing up for the City's implementation of the first year of Right to Counsel. Right to Counsel will provide free legal representation to low-income people in eviction court and administrative hearings in instances not diverted by mediation. These are often more complicated cases involving issues of habitability, breach of the lease, reasonable accommodations, or other legal defenses. Having robust court representation will ensure a much fairer eviction court and contribute to reducing housing instability and homelessness in Philadelphia.

Because eviction filings in Philadelphia disproportionately affect Black women and communities of color, Eviction Diversion, Right to Counsel and the Renters' Access Act are important solutions for decreasing those racial impacts, and promoting access to justice for Black and Brown Philadelphians.

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REVENUE & OTHER SUPPORT

Contracts & Grants	\$13,311,701
Contributions	\$4,862,747
Attorney Fees	\$227,059
Interest Income	\$4,943
Other Income	\$1,412,700
Subtotal Revenue	\$19,819,150

EXPENSES

Program Services	\$15,835,105
Management & General	\$1,297,193
Fundraising	\$397,190
Total Expenses	\$17,529,488

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Change in Assets	\$2,289,662
Net Assets Beginning of Year	\$14,620,246
End of Year	\$14,308,650

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