



# Community Legal Services of Philadelphia FY22–FY23 Annual Report



Here are just a few ways CLS has helped our clients in two years:

We helped

**4,345**

tenants facing eviction.

We helped

**1,949**

clients with homeownership issues, preserving over **\$16 million** in equity while saving homes.

We helped

**734**

clients access cash assistance, food stamps, and heat. Those clients received more than **\$78,845 per month in SNAP benefits and \$147,817 in LIHEAP grants.**

We helped

**1,572**

clients with utilities issues.

## A MESSAGE FROM DEBBY FREEDMAN

I have been honored to serve as Community Legal Services' Executive Director this year, and I am deeply grateful for the courage and determination of our clients, advocates, board members, supporters, and friends.

Thank you for standing with us to fight poverty and challenge systems of injustice. With you at our side, CLS has remained a critical open door for almost 11,000 Philadelphians who need legal help to keep their homes, health care, income, and families each year.

So often, low-income people are blamed for circumstances outside of their control or expected to do the impossible to survive. But when our clients turn to us for outstanding legal representation, they can finally be heard and believed. With CLS in their corners, our clients are staring down injustice and saying, "Not this time."

Over the past two years, our clients have stood up for their rights when harmful systems sought to keep them trapped in poverty. Many client advocates raised their voices to make life better for countless others, even as they faced economic insecurity and uncertainty in their own lives. You can read their stories and see the legal system through their eyes over the next few pages.

At CLS, our work with one client grows into meaningful change that will help thousands more. Alongside our clients, we change systems, fight racial oppression, and tear down systemic barriers to justice. In this report, you'll read about our work to design and implement nationally recognized programs that keep people in their homes, protect intergenerational wealth, and foster stability for low-income Philadelphians.

With your support, I am certain that we will create a future where everyone can thrive.

As always – thank you!



# KEEPING FAMILIES CONNECTED TO HEALTHCARE



Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our clients faced job loss, hunger, cold, and the risk of homelessness through no fault of their own. CLS stood side by side with them to advocate for just policies that kept people afloat.

Beginning in March 2020, the federal government prohibited states from terminating most Medicaid recipients. During this crisis, low-income people could visit their primary care physicians, pick up their prescriptions, or access treatment for COVID without delay or fear.

However, the moratorium on Medicaid terminations ended on April 1, 2023. Hundreds of thousands of eligible Pennsylvanians were once again at risk of losing their health insurance if they did not complete confusing and burdensome paperwork, often with very little turnaround time.



In collaboration with the Pennsylvania Health Law Project and Pennsylvania Health Access Network, CLS immediately jumped in to protect our clients' access to healthcare. Here's how:

- **CLS and our partners convinced the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (PA DHS) to take twelve months to renew Medicaid accurately and effectively for people who are eligible.** PA DHS was planning to review eligibility for more than one million people in just six months. We warned state officials that conducting a massive number of Medicaid renewals in less than a year would lead to eligible people losing their health insurance. After several months of consistent advocacy, they listened!
- **Together, we also advocated for DHS to use multiple communication strategies, including text messages, to reach Medicaid recipients,** both to update recipients' contact information and to inform recipients of the renewal process.
- **We launched a comprehensive strategy to educate Medicaid recipients about what to expect during the renewal process and how to assert their legal rights if they were cut off from Medicaid.** CLS and our partners developed flyers and held webinars, community meetings, and press briefings to keep people insured.
- **We represented clients who were unfairly cut off from Medicaid, and we will continue to help them stay connected to their health insurance.**

# A NATIONAL LEADER IN PREVENTING EVICTIONS & HOMELESSNESS



For years, the landlord at Lindley Towers broke the law and kept families living in dangerous conditions. Owners of the hundred-unit apartment complex had not renewed their rental license and consistently failed to respond to repair requests. Determined to keep a roof over their families' heads, tenants endured excessive leaking, mold, rodent infestations, and other hazards with no relief in sight.

## **No one should be forced to live like this.**

As a result of the landlord's neglect, Lindley Towers partially collapsed on September 14, 2022. In the span of seconds, one hundred people were evacuated and lost their homes, their belongings, and their pets.

CLS advocates met with tenants at the temporary shelter. We jumped in to represent displaced families and help people retrieve their belongings. On September 21, CLS filed a lawsuit on behalf of twenty-two tenants to hold the landlord accountable and ensure that our clients do not fall into homelessness while the owners make repairs.

The very next day, a judge issued an emergency injunction and ordered the landlord to pay for hotel rooms and refund tenants for first and last month's rent and security deposits! Since then, CLS has expanded the number of plaintiffs to forty-seven. Our advocates are working hard to get justice for our clients, ensuring that they are able to find safe, affordable, and healthy homes!

# 19,000

tenants in Philadelphia face eviction cases in court each year, and thousands more are forced to move without access to the judicial system.

Our homes provide the foundation for our lives. When families live in safe, healthy, and affordable homes, parents are more likely to find and keep a job, and children come to school ready to learn.

However, 19,000 tenants in Philadelphia face eviction cases in court each year, and thousands more are forced to move without access to the judicial system. Our clients were clear that Philadelphia's eviction system needed to change. Informed by our clients' lived experiences, CLS was able to successfully advocate for critical policies that respond to the evolving needs of low-income tenants. We even presented on these programs at the White House and in front of Congress, so cities across the country can create their own programs from this model.

1

**CLS's policy leadership spurred critical legislation extending Philadelphia's Eviction Diversion requirement to all eviction cases for 2022 and 2023.**

Since 2020, the Eviction Diversion Program has kept families in their homes and given tenants the opportunity to negotiate affordable repayment plans with their landlords before an eviction is filed. Thanks to this program, which CLS helped create and implement, thousands of landlords and tenants reached agreements out of court and saved millions of dollars in court costs and legal fees.

2

**We also successfully launched Philadelphia's Right to Counsel (RTC) program in five zip codes with the highest eviction rates.**

When more complicated cases cannot be resolved through diversion, low-income tenants now have the right to an attorney during eviction hearings. RTC helps ensure that tenants have a fair chance to be heard and reach agreements with their landlords. In addition to representing individual clients through RTC, CLS collaborated with city government and community partners to strengthen and expand the program.

3

**CLS has continued to champion and promote the groundbreaking Renters' Access Act, a new law designed to protect housing access for tenants with eviction records.**

Eviction records can haunt tenants for life, even if a tenant won their case and was not actually evicted. To combat this issue, the Renters' Access Act prevents landlords from denying rental applications based on eviction records and credit scores alone. The law was passed in 2021, and as it took effect, we began outreach with materials we developed to educate people about their legal rights.

# CLOSING THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP & PRESERVING PHILADELPHIA HOMES

Nearly forty years ago, Illona Johnson completed 350 hours of sweat equity with Habitat for Humanity to purchase her rowhome in North Philadelphia. Living with other people had become untenable, so she rolled up her sleeves and finished some days covered in dust and debris, but it was all worth it. At last, she and her nine-year-old son had a place to call their own.

Paying her mortgage each month was not easy, and she sometimes worked two jobs to make ends meet. But that didn't stop Ms. Johnson from making her home a safe space for her son to hang out and play games after school with his friends.

Once her son grew up and moved out, she became a foster parent and welcomed another generation of children into her home. In the meantime, she continued to pay her mortgage each month, but the bill kept rising because of Ms. Johnson's property taxes.

In 2018, she finally paid off her mortgage and owned her home free and clear. One year later, Ms. Johnson's property tax assessment doubled from \$102,000 to \$206,000—with an increased tax bill of \$2,800. At the age of seventy-two,



↑ Illona Johnson (left) and Council President Kenyatta Johnson (right)

living on Social Security income, this bill was far more than she could afford, so she turned to CLS for help.

Ms. Johnson's CLS attorney successfully appealed her inaccurate tax assessment, so that she received an accurate valuation of her home. Then, they worked together to apply for tax relief programs to reach a truly affordable tax bill. As a result, Ms. Johnson's tax bill will be roughly \$602 dollars each year for the rest of her life—saving her over \$1,500 dollars this year alone. Finally, Ms. Johnson has been approved for the Pennsylvania Property Tax Rebate Program. She will eventually get a rebate on her bill of up to \$750 back from the state of Pennsylvania each year. Ms. Johnson's out-of-pocket costs will be zero dollars, and her home will be safe and secure.

“You mean to tell me I worked this long and hard. I paid off my house, and if I can’t pay my taxes, you’re going to put me out in the street? It’s not going to work like that. No.”

– Illona Johnson

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## Advocating for Affordable Property Taxes

Ms. Johnson is one of tens of thousands of Philadelphians who struggle to pay their property taxes each year. In April 2022, the City announced that the average residential property tax assessment would increase by 31%, although many of our clients saw much higher increases. In Nicetown-Tioga, where CLS’s North Philadelphia office has served clients for over fifty years, the median assessment increased by more than 80%.

As a result, our clients were at risk of losing their beloved family homes and being forced out of the city. These homes not only hold timeless memories but also represent the only opportunity for many Black and Brown families to pass down wealth.

**No one should lose their home because they can’t afford their property taxes.** As the new, higher tax assessments rolled out, CLS’s Tax Team sprang into action to prevent unnecessary foreclosures. Ms. Johnson joined her CLS attorneys at City Hall to advocate for low-income homeowners who needed additional tax relief to stay in their homes and preserve their family’s only source of wealth.

After persistent advocacy from CLS and our allies, Philadelphia’s City Council voted unanimously to expand the Homestead Exemption, the Longtime Owner Occupants Program, and the Senior Tax Freeze, providing tax relief to all of Philadelphia. For example, the expansion of the Homestead Exemption from \$45,000 to \$80,000 will allow every homeowner who lives in their home to save \$1,120 on their annual tax bills.



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## Unlocking Family Wealth

CLS helps our homeowner clients with everything from fighting foreclosures and sheriff's sales to qualifying for mortgage modifications and assistance programs. And once the threat of foreclosure or displacement is behind them, they can pass their homes onto the next generation, make necessary repairs, and pursue their dreams.

However, many of these opportunities are out of reach for our low-income homeowner clients with tangled titles. They have inherited their family home or a partial interest of their family home, but their name is not on the deed to the property.

Tangled titles make it nearly impossible to qualify for assistance programs, interact with mortgage lenders, or borrow money to make repairs. This legal issue disproportionately affects Black and Brown neighborhoods.

After two years of persistent advocacy, CLS, Philly VIP, and Philadelphia Legal Assistance were awarded city funding to resolve tangled titles for low-income homeowners. In 2022-23, CLS hired a new attorney and three new paralegals to help homeowners with tangled titles and wills.



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### CLS launches a new Wills and Estate Planning practice!

CLS is now offering free estate planning services to our clients, including wills, financial power of attorney, and healthcare directives. Through this important work, we can prevent tangled titles from occurring in the future and preserve intergenerational wealth in Black and Brown communities through homeownership.

← **CLS's Tangled Title Team educates Philadelphia homeowners about the importance of creating a will at Dare to Imagine Church in Northwest Philadelphia.**





↑ CLS paralegals Neshea Jackson (second from right) and Kali Lamb (right) attend our 5th Record Clearing Pre-Conference at the NLADA Equal Justice Conference.

Neshea Jackson loves the law. Years ago, Ms. Jackson was facing an issue with her landlord. She took such great initiative that her attorney believed she could have won the case on her own! As a single mom of four sons, Ms. Jackson worked as a unit secretary in area hospitals to take care of her family, but the law kept calling. She eventually completed school and obtained a certificate in paralegal studies.

But Ms. Jackson was never hired as a paralegal. In fact, she did not get any of the family-sustaining jobs she sought over the years. She sailed through interviews and made it to the final round multiple times only to be told, “We really like you and think you would be perfect for the job, but...”

**For over thirty years, Ms. Jackson’s felony record locked her out of good jobs for which she was qualified.**

Ms. Jackson’s life changed forever on May 3, 1990. A first-time mom at age twenty-two, she was home caring for her six-week-old baby when she signed for a package addressed to her son’s father. He was involved in identity theft, and she signed to receive a credit card in someone else’s name. FBI agents showed up to arrest her partner, and she was arrested too.



↑ Neshea Jackson

“I remember her saying, ‘I will help you every step of the way.’ When she said that, it made me feel like I had someone on my side... She made me feel genuinely cared for, knowing that CLS would be there for me.”

—Neshea Jackson, on working with her CLS advocate to apply for a pardon

Since then, Ms. Jackson has not been in trouble with the law. She raised her sons to do the right thing and learn from their mom’s mistakes. Even so, the felony record haunted her. She felt ashamed to tell her loved ones about her record or ask for help.

One night while scrolling on her phone, Ms. Jackson came across a Facebook ad from CLS encouraging people to check if their records were eligible to be sealed. She submitted her information, and it wasn’t too long before a CLS paralegal contacted our new client.

More than two years ago, Ms. Jackson and her CLS advocate began the process of obtaining a pardon. Since then, Ms. Jackson has advocated to expand automated record sealing to include felonies so that hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians can access a fresh start without having to go through the lengthy and burdensome pardon process. She also wrote a paper entitled, “You’re Almost Ashamed to Talk about It: Lived Experience with Justice Involvement and Pursuing Record Relief in Philadelphia” and shared it at the American Psychology-Law Society Conference.

On October 13, 2023, the Pennsylvania Board of pardons voted 5-0 to recommend Ms. Jackson for a pardon! Her journey to a fresh start is not over yet. Now, she waits for Governor Shapiro to review and sign off on her pardon.

Ms. Jackson knows the power of the law to shape people’s lives better than most, and she wants to use her experience to help people like her access justice.

**We are proud to share that Ms. Jackson recently started as a CLS paralegal, and she will be primarily supporting our criminal records work. We are grateful that our clients will be able to receive expert legal help and encouragement from someone who shares their experience with the criminal legal system.**



## CELEBRATING CLEAN SLATE EXPANSION



CLS Managing Attorney of the Employment Unit and Youth Justice Project Jamie Gullen (right), Senior Attorney Katie Svoboda-Kindle (second from left), and Rep. Sheryl Delozier (second from right) stand with impacted advocates Mr. Ball (left) and Gina Davis (center).



CLS Director of Litigation Sharon Dietrich (center) urges the PA Legislature to pass Clean Slate expansion.



After testifying about how her felony record followed her for over 20 years, Gina Davis speaks with Rep. Sheryl Delozier and Rep. Jordan Harris (left).

Old criminal records are the number one reason workers come to CLS for help with an employment issue. After helping so many clients to get criminal record expungements, CLS's Employment Unit knew we could dream bigger and change systems to address barriers to employment on a much larger level. Together with our clients, we launched a bipartisan campaign to pass Clean Slate in 2018, allowing for automated sealing of certain old and minor criminal records.

In December 2023, the Pennsylvania General Assembly voted to expand Clean Slate to include record sealing for people with certain drug and property felonies, and Governor Shapiro signed the bill into law! This landmark legislation will remove barriers to employment, housing, education, and other opportunities for hundreds of thousands of our friends and neighbors across the Commonwealth.

This crucial expansion builds on five years of success. In 2018, PA became the nation's first state to enact automatic record sealing. In 2020, Clean Slate was expanded to allow cases to be sealed when fines are owed, removing a financial barrier. Finally, PA joins 37 other states that allow for sealing of felonies.

CLS is proud to have led the way in creating and advocating for Clean Slate, a groundbreaking law that has changed lives and will open the doors for so many people. We're grateful to the many directly impacted individuals who shared their stories in the fight for this law, as well as to the partners who helped make it a reality and the leaders that introduced this important legislation, including Rep. Jordan Harris, Rep. Sheryl Delozier, Sen. Lisa Baker, and Sen. Tony Williams.



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## A Victory for Family Preservation and Language Access

CLS successfully appealed a finding of child abuse made against our client. In this case, the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (Philadelphia DHS) failed to provide our client with an interpreter in his native language of Q’eqchi, a Mayan language prevalent in parts of Central America. Philadelphia DHS then tried to use his improperly-interpreted statements against him in court. CLS fought this clear violation of our client’s right to language access through multiple appeals, and the Pennsylvania Superior Court found that our client was denied the right to meaningfully participate in legal proceedings and testify on his own behalf. The court vacated the finding of child abuse and explicitly cautioned Philadelphia DHS about its legal obligation to provide people with appropriate language access.

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## Ms. Harling Was Not Backing Down

Ophelia Harling is a home health aide who turned to CLS for help when her employer stole her wages. She worked hard to care for disabled people and older adults who need help with everyday tasks in their homes. In fact, she and her colleagues often worked up to one hundred hours per week, but their employer never paid them for working overtime.

CLS and our fantastic co-counsel, Winebrake & Santillo, LLC, filed a class action, with Ms. Harling as the named plaintiff, to get our clients paid for the long hours they had worked. On the side, the employer offered Ms. Harling a substantial sum to drop the class action, but she refused to back down. Instead, she chose to fight for her two hundred coworkers. Because of her advocacy, we settled the case for \$600,000 in back pay for class members and a significant service award for Ms. Harling from the judge.



Available where you listen to podcasts!



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## FIGHTING FOR HER NAME

On a special episode of CLS’s *How Is That Legal?* podcast, our client Angela West shared her decades-long battle to have her name removed from Pennsylvania’s ChildLine Registry. In 2004, Ms. West and six coworkers were placed on Pennsylvania’s ChildLine Registry after a child at their job developed unexplained bruising. Ms. West fought to clear her name for eighteen years and she could not get living wage jobs in her field or volunteer at her grandchildren’s schools during that time. With CLS representing her, she finally won her appeal. Now, Ms. West is the lead petitioner in CLS’s ChildLine Registry lawsuit *A.W. v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* where we hope to have the Registry declared unconstitutional.

We’re grateful to Ms. West for her fierce advocacy and to our co-counsel, Tad LeVan of Stapleton Segal Cochran LLC and Professor Seth Kreimer, for their critical partnership in support of our clients.

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↑ **CLS and Philadelphia Legal Assistance joined forces to make sure families get the money they are owed! The team attended an open house at the Crossroad Women’s Center to make sure families claim the enhanced Child Tax Credit and other credits.**



# BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

Every spring, CLS’s distinguished Leadership Council runs the Bar Campaign and celebrates justice at the Breakfast of Champions, which is generously sponsored by the Philadelphia Trial Lawyers Association. The funds raised through this campaign help CLS serve more clients and support our most innovative projects and advocacy. At the event, CLS and our guests celebrate the law firms, individuals, and foundations that are dedicated to the cause of equal justice for all, and CLS presents the Equal Justice Awards to people who demonstrate an exceptional commitment to CLS’s mission.

## 2022 EQUAL JUSTICE AWARD RECIPIENTS



↑ Philadelphia Councilmember Jamie Gauthier



↑ (Right) Kristen Dama, Esq. Managing Attorney, SSI Unit and Medical-Legal Partnership, CLS

← (Left) Jen Burdick, Esq. Divisional Supervising Attorney and Duffy Fellow, CLS

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## 2023 EQUAL JUSTICE AWARD RECIPIENTS



← (Left to Right) Pennsylvania Senator Nikil Saval; Valentine Brown on behalf of Duane Morris; Rachel Garland, Esq. Co-Managing Attorney, Housing Unit, CLS

Duane Morris LLP





↑ CLS joined with Nomo Foundation to host a record clearing clinic with the support of The Promise! Our advocates connected with our neighbors and helped people with criminal records understand their rights.

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↑ CLS staff joined members of the workers' rights group El Comité to celebrate the group's many accomplishments over the past year! With support from CLS, committee members coordinated know-your-rights trainings around paid sick leave, wage theft, sexual harassment, retaliation, workplace organizing, and movement strategy.



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↑ **CLS Supervising Attorney in the Health and Independence Unit Pam Walz (second from right) participated in an “Elder Law 101” program at the Martin Luther King Older Adult Center. The event was sponsored by Rep. Donna Bullock (third from right) and the First Judicial District’s Elder Justice and Civil Resource Center.**

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← **CLS Divisional Supervising Attorney in the Homeownership and Consumer Rights Unit Rachel Labush was in Harrisburg with The Philadelphia Unemployment Project calling attention to a backlog of over 15,000 applications for the Homeowners Assistance Fund (HAF). Many homeowners have been waiting for over a year for their applications to be approved and are now facing potential foreclosure or sheriff sale. Rachel urged the courts to postpone foreclosure activity until decisions are made on HAF applications.**



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Bailey Glasser LLP

Connolly Wells & Gray LLP

Lichten & Liss-Riordan, P.C.

## Grants and Fellowships FY2022 and FY2023

American Bar Association	Food Resource & Action Center	Enhancement Fund
Arnold Ventures	Gender Justice Fund	The Pew Charitable Trusts
Borealis Philanthropy	Hess Foundation	Philadelphia Bar Foundation
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities	The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation	Philadelphia Corporation for Aging
The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia	Independence Foundation	The Philadelphia Foundation
City of Philadelphia	The Ivywood Foundation	Philadelphia Health Partnership
City of Philadelphia Department of Human Services	JPB Foundation	The Promise - The Philadelphia Poverty Action Fund
Comcast	JPMorgan Chase Foundation	The Leo and Peggy Pierce Family Foundation
Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity	W.K. Kellogg Foundation	Public Health Management Corporation
Community Behavioral Health	The Peter and Judy Leone Foundation	Skadden Foundation
Division of Housing and Community Development	Lincoln Financial Foundation	Spring Point Partners
Duffy Fellowship	National Employment Law Project	United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey
Eagles Social Justice Fund	Oak Foundation	Wells Fargo
Equal Justice Works	The Pennsylvania IOLTA Board	William Penn Foundation
	Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network	
	The Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation	



← **CLS Co-Managing Attorney of the Housing Unit Kadeem Morris (second from right) spoke at the Philadelphia Bar Association quarterly meeting to shed light on the growing movement to provide legal counsel as a matter of right to low-income people in civil legal proceedings. Kadeem was joined by Professor Lou Rulli (left), PA House Speaker Rep. Joanna McClinton (second from left), and CLS Executive Director Debby Freedman (right).**



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# FINANCIALS

## July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023

### REVENUE & OTHER SUPPORT

Contracts & Grants	\$ 18,990,376
Contributions	\$ 6,018,679
Attorney Fees	\$ 109,426
Interest Income	\$ 143,781
Other Income	\$ 3,590
<b>Subtotal Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 25,265,852</b>

### EXPENSES

Program Services	\$ 21,950,746
Management & General	\$ 1,211,464
Fundraising	\$ 848,322
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 24,010,532</b>

### TOTAL ASSETS

Net Assets Beginning of Year	\$ 17,304,776
Net Assets End of Year	\$ 18,564,794
<b>Change in Assets</b>	<b>\$ 1,260,018</b>

## July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022

### REVENUE & OTHER SUPPORT

Contracts & Grants	\$ 15,556,973
Contributions	\$ 5,136,136
Attorney Fees	\$ 76,763
Interest Income	\$ 4,758
<b>Subtotal Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 20,774,630</b>

### EXPENSES

Program Services	\$ 18,053,771
Management & General	\$ 1,418,038
Fundraising	\$ 596,357
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 20,068,166</b>

### TOTAL ASSETS

Net Assets Beginning of Year	\$ 16,598,312
Net Assets End of Year	\$ 17,304,776
<b>Change in Assets</b>	<b>\$ 706,464</b>

**CENTER CITY  
OFFICE**

1424 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
215.981.3700

**NORTH PHILADELPHIA  
OFFICE**

1410 West Erie Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19140

**LOGAN SQUARE  
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100 North 18th St., Suite 3400  
Philadelphia, PA 19103



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