



# 2020 Annual Report



**SEOLS**  
Southeastern Ohio Legal Services

**professional**

**pleasant**

**astute**

**ease**

**thankful**

**respect**

**helpful**

**care**

**legal aid**

**prompt**

**voice**

**honorable**

**service**

**progress**

**lawyer**

**experience**

**necessary**

## ***Our Mission***

SEOLS provides civil legal aid and advocacy to combat unfairness and injustice and to help people rise out of poverty.

*Cover photos:*

*Unemployment Compensation Client Clyde Rutter (top left)*

*Education Client Nicolai Hostettler (top right)*

*Home Foreclosure Client Carolyn DeMoss (bottom left)*

2020 was a tough year. Despite that, we have never been prouder of our staff and the work that they do on behalf of low-income families and individuals living in Southeastern Ohio. When the pandemic hit, SEOLS continued serving our clients without a gap despite the shift to more remote work. We were very quickly able to get materials online, shared with community partners and kept them up to date regarding the many changes to programs and laws around COVID-19.

While there were two different moratoriums put in place to protect tenants from eviction, those provisions had holes in them, which allowed many evictions to move forward. Our staff recognized this issue and worked with a variety of our courts to ensure onsite eviction assistance through the creation of several Tenant Advocacy Projects. These projects have been very successful in keeping people housed, preventing eviction judgment entries, decreasing the amount of rent owed and allowing families more time to move if that is needed. Each of those pieces increases household stability and decreases the likelihood of homelessness.

We shifted staff to address the skyrocketing number of unemployment compensation issues, which increased almost 600%. We worked both on those individual cases but also systemically to address barriers to access, including for those who lacked internet access.

SEOLS continued to be proactive in its advocacy as well as working with the community, using nuisance abatements to improve mobile home parks, partnering with local organizations to reduce homelessness and successfully litigating systemic issues like the failure to provide appointed counsel in adoption cases.

While much of 2020 was uncertain, our representation and advocacy on behalf of the clients we are privileged to represent remained strong in large part because of the support of many of you, and for that we are incredibly grateful. We are also thankful for our incredible staff who quickly adapted to the challenges of remote work and tirelessly advocated for our clients.

Sincerely,

**Thomas Bonasera**  
Outgoing OSLSA Board Chair

**William Taylor**  
Incoming OSLSA Board Chair

**Kathleen C. McGarvey**  
Executive Director



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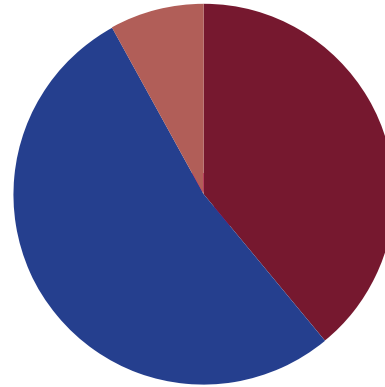
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# ***12,965 PEOPLE HELPED IN 2020***



**5,063**  
**Children**

**6,907**  
**Adults**

**995**  
**Seniors**

## ***5,295 total cases***

# LEGAL AID EXPANDS OUTREACH DURING PANDEMIC

## *COVID-19 Response Includes Virtual Clinics, Videos, Social Media Campaigns*

When Ohio Governor Mike DeWine issued the state's first stay-at-home order in March, SEOLS immediately looked for innovative ways to connect with low-income Ohioans and help them access the critical services that would allow them to keep a roof overhead and food on the table. We knew our individual clients as well as our many partner agencies would turn to us for help understanding the impact of the pandemic, accessing essential benefits and navigating new programs intended to help. SEOLS quickly identified an alternative to in-person clinics, launched a COVID-19 page on our website and developed numerous informational social media and video campaigns.

In mid-March, SEOLS and our sister organization, the Legal Aid Society of Columbus (LASC), became the first legal aid programs in the state to convert all clinics to a virtual model. Volunteer attorneys consulted with clients during scheduled phone calls. They fielded questions from individuals who had lost jobs and were worried about making rent and mortgage payments and counseled essential workers trying to feed their families

and keep their utilities on while enduring a wage garnishment. Other callers had concerns about divorces, wills and custody agreements.

In the midst of widespread confusion about unemployment compensation and tenant rights in May, attorneys participated in a call-in television show hosted by an NBC affiliate to answer questions from viewers about tenant rights and unemployment compensation. Attorneys in our Chillicothe office regularly participated in local COVID-19 response meetings to ensure the needs of those living in poverty were heard and considered. They gave updates and provided resources regarding the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) Eviction Moratorium, unemployment compensation issues, and CARES Act funding. Several offices assisted local government officials in accessing funds for rental assistance.

Staff members created informational brochures highlighting everything from obtaining emergency food benefits and preventing utility shut-offs to avoiding scams and following custody rules. Renters, laid-off workers, students, parents,

other individuals, as well as community groups and the media, used this information that we continuously posted and updated on a COVID-19 Information page on our website.

Our COVID-19 work group used these documents to develop social media posts highlighting the most critical information. The team also recorded videos through a branded, "Helping from Home," effort to clearly explain the complicated steps to protect a mortgage, invoke the CDC moratorium and resolve other issues with landlords.

SEOLS and LASC also partnered with other Ohio legal aid organizations in two statewide social media campaigns. In September, the legal aids launched the #LostInTheSystem campaign designed to draw attention to ongoing issues with the state's unemployment compensation system and inform struggling Ohioans that free help was available. In October, during Lead Poisoning Prevention Week, Ohio legal aids again joined forces to raise awareness of the dangers of lead poisoning and a concerning decrease in the number of children undergoing lead testing during the pandemic.

Mark worked as a short order cook at a breakfast restaurant. He was laid off at the start of COVID-19. The 35-year-old veteran tried unsuccessfully to apply to the ODJFS for unemployment. The system kicked him out because it flagged him as the owner of the business, which he is not. He also received multiple notices from the unemployment system, which could not be opened, read or responded to. SEOLS reached out to ODJFS Unemployment Insurance and was able to resolve the issues.



#LostInTheSystem



Don't stay  
#LOSTINTHESYSTEM  
Call Legal Aid for help with  
unemployment compensation issues.

# WHAT DOES THE CDC MORATORIUM ON EVICTIONS MEAN TO ME?

Visit our website for a list of Frequently Asked Questions.

Throughout the pandemic, staff from SEOLS and LASC worked side by side on outreach and communication efforts to maximize their limited resources while responding to the needs of a large and diverse audience. The partnership allowed us to quickly share general updates with the entire region while still maintaining a local focus, and when necessary, compile detailed information for individual communities with more specific concerns.



# Work Continues to Empower Low-income Individuals and Community Groups with Advocacy Skills

In addition to responding to the challenges of COVID-19 and serving individual clients, SEOLS continued to work with communities to empower them to make positive changes. Known as “community lawyering,” the practice focuses on helping people identify community problems and giving them the tools to address them. The challenges that 2020 brought made this work both more difficult and more important.

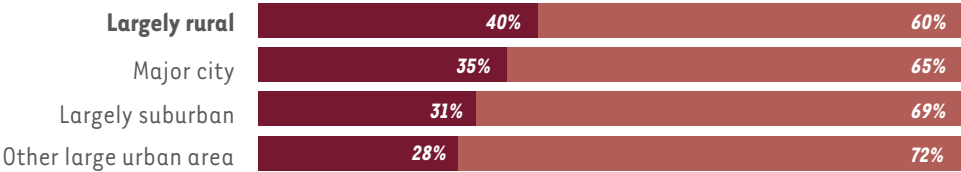
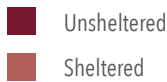
In 2020, the Athens office continued its support for the Gladden Clean Up Crew, a group of residents who banded together to address dangerous conditions in the mobile home park where they live. Having previously worked with SEOLS to legally withhold their rent to force the landlord to make critical repairs – and ultimately pressuring the owners to sell the park – the residents established a more cooperative relationship with the new owners and more capacity to work together to address the needs of their community.

With leadership from Project Managing Attorney Robin Bozian, SEOLS helped create the Washington County Homeless Project, a group dedicated to preventing homelessness in the county, which – like many rural areas – does not have a shelter. One of the group’s first initiatives was The Laundry Project, which connects people at risk of becoming homeless with access to a laundromat. School personnel, mental health providers and other agencies can refer people to the program. Bozian worked with volunteers to develop plans for a drop-in and warming center, where people will be able to stay during daylight hours to get some coffee, take a shower, and even do laundry.

“In addition to the work SEOLS does for individuals, staff members are instrumental in advancing many community initiatives,” said Lisa Valentine, board member of the Washington County Homeless Project. “SEOLS plays a key role in identifying issues impacting low-income

## Homelessness by Location Type

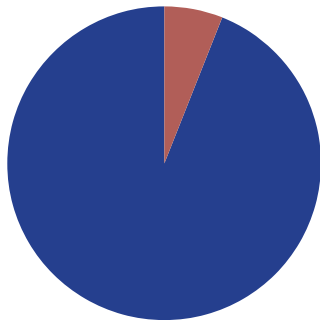
Unsheltered homeless populations have drastically shorter life expectancies. In rural areas, a greater percentage of the homeless population is unsheltered.





people from opioid abuse to homelessness and everything in between and works to find innovative ways to address them. These efforts make a long-term difference in our community.”

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**Women make up  
93.5%  
of the single adults with children  
who are seeking services  
related to homelessness.**

*Source: Ohio Housing Finance Agency's CONFRONTING HOMELESSNESS report*

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*At right: A client of The Laundry Project washes clothes for her family.*



# SEOLS ADDS TENANT CLINICS TO ADDRESS EVICTIONS

## *Work Focuses on Connecting Clients to Rent Assistance, Addressing Barriers to Stable Housing*

Even before the pandemic, rural tenants struggled to attend eviction hearings. The barriers – geographic distance, lack of transportation, and isolation from legal support and information about the consequences of failing to appear – were magnified by COVID-19. Loss of income, often coupled with illness and resulting medical expenses, made it increasingly challenging for low-income Ohioans to make ends meet and pay their rent. For those who fell behind, the risk of eviction varied greatly throughout the state because government officials failed to enact a statewide moratorium on evictions. As a result, a patchwork of rules and responses regarding evictions emerged.

Even the Centers for Disease Control's "eviction moratorium," enacted in September, did not stop all evictions – nor was it interpreted in the same way across Ohio's various jurisdictions. As a result, renters – including families, people with health conditions and senior citizens – received court orders to leave their homes. Tenants must proactively invoke the moratorium to benefit from it, yet many were unaware of its protections.

Some tenants who invoke the moratorium still lose their case, meaning they will be required to leave when the moratorium expires.

"The moratorium has been implemented poorly," said Marcus Roth, communications and development director at the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio. "People have to know about it. They have to apply for it. The damage evictions have on families and children can be really long term."

Nonetheless, through the addition of clinics and increased outreach, SEOLS has remained on the front lines of the effort to keep low-income tenants safely housed during this unprecedented time of risk and uncertainty.

In Lawrence County, SEOLS offered an advice clinic for people struggling to pay rent and worried about being evicted. Tenants with concerns about unsafe conditions or ongoing maintenance issues could also get help at the weekly SEOLS clinic at the local Ohio Means Jobs office.

Our New Philadelphia office collaborated with Cambridge Municipal Court Magistrate Teresa Liston to include contact information for SEOLS with the summons that the court serves to defendants in eviction cases.

At the request of Municipal Court Judge Todd Grace, the Athens office attends court whenever eviction hearings are scheduled. SEOLS provides tenants with information about their legal rights and assists them with asserting their eligibility under the CDC eviction moratorium.

Building on the success of an onsite legal clinic at Franklin County Municipal Court, operated by our sister program, the Legal Aid Society of Columbus, SEOLS launched similar projects in several counties. With the support of an Ohio Justice for All Fellow and a grant from Fairfield County, SEOLS Tenant Advocacy Project (TAP) operates weekly clinics in Fairfield Municipal Court and Zanesville Municipal Court. Tenants facing an eviction receive free legal information, advice and representation. Lawyers from SEOLS and pro bono volunteers from the local bar association meet with tenants before their



eviction hearings to identify legal defenses to stop evictions and negotiate mutually beneficial solutions with landlords.

Since the launch of the Fairfield TAP clinic, SEOLS has helped more than 75 families and individuals who were at risk of losing their homes. TAP works closely with local agencies and community organizations to connect tenants with services like rental assistance and behavioral health supports that will prevent future evictions and promote long-term housing stability. In doing so, TAP addresses both the immediate COVID housing crisis and the more systemic access-to-justice issues that create barriers to stable and affordable housing, said Ohio Access to Justice Fellow Caitlyn McDaniel.

“The addition of the clinic at eviction court means low-income tenants have access to legal representation on the day of their hearing – which will make the process more equitable – as well as referrals to other agencies,” she said. “It’s our hope that by increasing awareness of community resources, we can help overcome housing insecurity in our counties.”

*SEOLS attorney Zack Eckles represented tenant Adam Kamara in a hearing, where they applied for and obtained a stay under the CDC eviction moratorium.*



## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

“There are so many people struggling in America. We have long had an eviction crisis, which the pandemic has only worsened. Housing is one of the most basic necessities. Without housing, everything in life becomes harder. Many people face the possibility of losing their housing and don’t know where to turn for help. I’m glad that TAP is here to step in. I like being able to volunteer to give legal guidance and information to help prevent people from losing their housing and facing the long-term negative consequences of an eviction.”



*—TAP volunteer Anthony Santana*



## ***SEOLS Helps Father Stop Eviction, Receive Benefits***

James Thweatt sought help from the Fairfield TAP clinic in November when his landlord tried to evict him from his home in Lancaster. Thweatt, who was laid off from his job in April, had fallen behind on his rent and truck payments. His partner, who was pregnant, also was unable to work. Although he applied to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) for unemployment at the time of his layoff, Thweatt was not receiving any benefits to support his household, which includes four children. "I would call the number, and they would always tell me something different," Thweatt said of his efforts to reach ODJFS to remedy the problem.

After helping Thweatt apply for rental assistance to catch up on back rent and assisting Thweatt in using the CDC moratorium to stay the eviction, SEOLS attorney Michael Gibbons-Camp referred him to paralegal Patrina Queen for help in dealing with ODJFS. In late November, nearly seven months after his layoff, Thweatt received a check for back benefits. "It was great receiving the help," he said. "I could tell Patrina genuinely cares about people – she's not just doing a job."

The payment allowed Thweatt to catch up on his truck payment and other bills. The family later moved to a more affordable home. "We've found a new place to live," he said. "We're so grateful for all the help we received."

*James Thweatt and his son.*



# COVID-19 RELATED JOB LOSSES OVERWHELM UNEMPLOYMENT SYSTEM, INCREASE SEOLS BENEFITS WORK

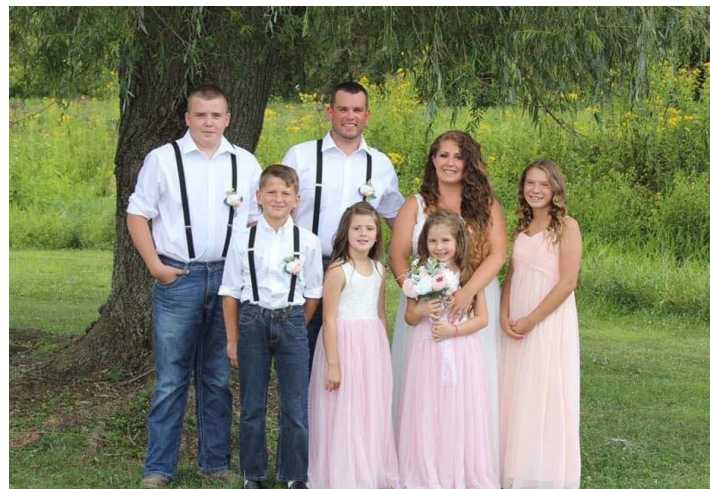
## *SEOLS Assistance Helps Family Secure Home*

When Kyle and Brittany Pongratz received an eviction notice in August, they were unsure what to do. They had about \$200 in their checking account and no idea where they would move if they lost their home. Kyle had been out of work since the start of the pandemic and was struggling to keep the family – which includes five children – afloat. Despite numerous calls and exchanges with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), he had received no funds from his unemployment compensation claim. The couple was late on rent and faced eviction. They were so far behind on utilities that their water was shut off.

Kyle called SEOLS. Attorney Jesse Moses immediately tackled the issues affecting the family. He contacted their landlord's attorney, then reached out to ODJFS about Kyle's unemployment claim and the family's water bill. He secured local JFS Prevention, Retention and Contingency funds to pay the water bill and worked with the city to get service restored. "We were showering at a friend's house," Kyle said. "We didn't have any money coming in. We didn't have anywhere to go. It was scary."

Moses also negotiated an agreement in which the landlord agreed to dismiss the eviction claim if the family would move out in 30 days. Moses' involvement also prompted ODJFS to process Kyle's unemployment claim, resulting in a weekly payment as well as a \$14,000 check for the back payments he was owed.

The 30-day move-out agreement gave Kyle and Brittany time to find a new, more affordable rental. They used the retroactive unemployment benefits to pay the security deposit and first and last month's rent on a new place. "We're so thankful for the help," said Kyle, who continues to search for a job while waiting for his company to call him back to work. "Jesse got everything figured out. I just don't know what we would have done without him."



*The Pongratz family*

## SEOLS Helps Senior Citizen Without Internet to Access Unemployment Benefits

When Evelyn Richards was laid off from her job at a publishing company at the start of the pandemic, she attempted to apply for unemployment. The 74-year-old, who does not have a smartphone or internet access, was unable to successfully initiate a claim. She sought help from the SEOLS Virtual Unemployment Assistance Clinic, and volunteer Sean Dunn helped the New Philadelphia resident set up an account.

Once the account was established, Richards still needed to have her claims backdated to the date she was laid off. SEOLS then helped her apply for retroactive unemployment for the weeks prior to her account being set up. Thanks to the assistance of Dunn and SEOLS attorney Jesse Moses, Richards received \$7,500 in back unemployment compensation.

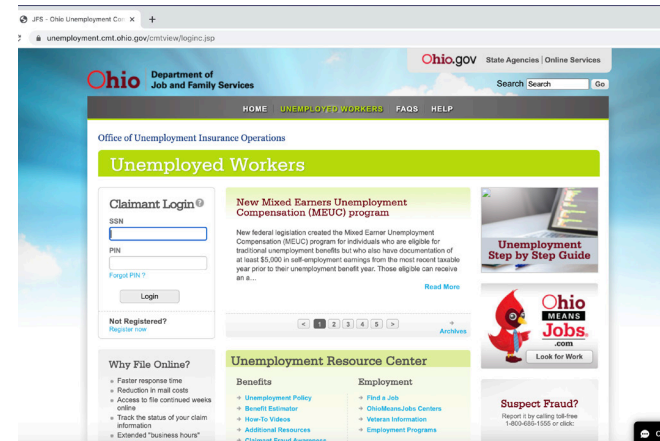
"I never would have gotten this taken care of on my own," she said. "Jesse was excellent. I tell people if they are having issues with unemployment or housing, contact SEOLS."



Volunteer Sean Dunn

During the COVID-19 pandemic,  
more than

**1.7 million**  
individuals received  
unemployment benefits in Ohio.



Source: Ohio Department of Job and Family Services



## **COVID-19 Leads to Record Unemployment Claims**

When COVID-19 related restrictions on business operations and social gatherings started in March, SEOLS experienced an immediate increase in requests for assistance with unemployment compensation issues. Working with our sister program, the Legal Aid Society of Columbus (LASC), we quickly trained staff attorneys and volunteers to handle the cases. Our Pro Bono and Community Engagement team launched a referral program that allowed volunteers from throughout the SEOLS and LASC service area to assist clients in resolving their unemployment application issues. Team members provided back-up and mentoring to the volunteers.

Requests for help continued as the pandemic stretched into summer and fall and Ohio's unemployment rate hit record numbers. Laid-off workers sought help navigating the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) unemployment systems, which were not up to the task of processing the thousands of unanticipated applications. Online applicants routinely had difficulty resetting their PIN in order to access the system, which delayed benefit payments. Many of our rural clients do not have access to the internet and attempted to reach ODJFS representatives by phone. Callers routinely reported getting disconnected after waiting on hold for hours.

Clients also needed help accessing new programs created to address hardships caused by the pandemic. In addition to traditional

unemployment compensation benefits, federal COVID relief bills created Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) for individuals whose loss of work was directly related to COVID and who would otherwise not be eligible for traditional unemployment benefits, including self-employed individuals, contract workers, or those with insufficient work histories.

By year's end, more than 25 SEOLS attorneys and paralegals were handling unemployment cases in some capacity and a total of 33 volunteers participated in the unemployment pro bono program. Their efforts resulted in clients accessing more than \$1 million in back payments and ongoing monthly benefits during the year.

Ohio's unemployment system received 2,097,854 initial unemployment claims, ***more than the previous five years combined.***

*Source: Ohio Department of Job and Family Services*

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

**“Some of the folks I worked with had never experienced unemployment or needed government assistance in any way. They seemed like they were in shock. Some others felt this was just one more mountain for them to climb. So many people are hurting right now. So many issues need attention and reform, but COVID-19 has brought a whole new dimension of challenges. I want to be able to say I did what I could and contributed.”**



*—Volunteer Debbie Crawford*

## Ohio High Court Finds in Favor of OSLSA: Indigent Parents Must Have Counsel in Adoption Proceedings



The Supreme Court of Ohio ruled in December that indigent parents facing the loss of their parental rights in adoption proceedings in probate court are entitled to appointed counsel just like indigent parents facing the termination of their parental rights in juvenile court.

The case of *In re Adoption of Y.E.F.*, Slip Opinion No. 2020-Ohio-6785 involves Erica Starkey, the mother of twin boys born

in 2014. When their father emptied the family's bank account and fled the area in April 2015 to avoid being arrested for a federal crime, Starkey asked the father's sister and her husband to care for the children. Although Starkey intended that the arrangement be temporary, the aunt and uncle sought custody of the twins. Even though she was awarded visitation rights, the aunt and uncle denied her requests.

In April 2018, the aunt and uncle filed petitions in Delaware County Probate Court to adopt the twins. Prior to the hearing, Starkey filed a request for appointed counsel and included a letter from our sister program, the Legal Aid Society of Columbus (LASC), raising the question of why indigent parents defending their rights are treated differently depending on whether the action occurs in a probate or juvenile court. The court denied the mother's request and scheduled an adoption hearing.

During the hearing, Starkey again asserted her desire for an attorney. She

told the court: "I didn't know that this would be a whole cross-examination ... maybe I should get an attorney." When testimony in the case ran long, the judge continued it to a later date. Before the hearing could be restarted, Starkey, with the help of SEOLS and LASC, began a legal challenge claiming that indigent parents facing the loss of their parental rights in probate court should receive the same right to counsel provided to indigent parents in juvenile court.

In December, the Supreme Court of Ohio agreed, saying: "We conclude that R.C. 2152.352 is unconstitutionally underinclusive as applied to indigent parents facing the loss of their parental rights in probate court ... we declare that indigent parents are entitled to counsel in adoption proceedings in probate court as a matter of equal protection under the law of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution and Article 1, Section 2 of the Ohio Constitution."



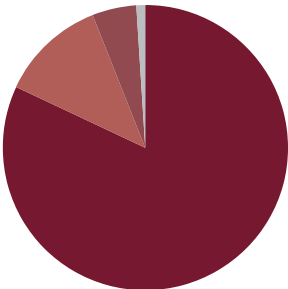
Starkey, who thought she was doing what was best for her children during a bad time, wept when she learned of the decision. "This is the most joy I have felt in years," she said. "It's been a long time since I cried tears of happiness. I hope this will help other mothers and fathers. No parent should have to endure the pain of not seeing their children."

Erica Starkey

*Financials*

2020 Revenue

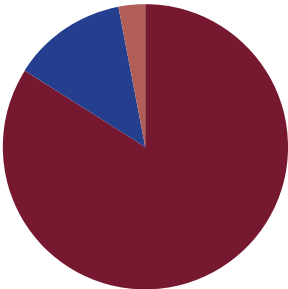
\$8,620,000



Grants	82.4%
PPP Loan Forgiven	11.3%
Investment Income	5.4%
Contributions/Other	.9%
	<hr/> 100.0%

2020 Expenses

\$7,400,000



Legal Program	84.0%
General & Administrative	13.2%
Fundraising	2.8%
	<hr/> 100.0%

## ***Donors***

### **\$2 Million - \$3 Million**

Legal Services Corporation

Ohio Access to Justice Foundation

### **\$500,000 - \$999,999**

United States Department of Justice -  
Victims of Crime Act, Violence Against  
Women Act

### **\$100,000 - \$250,000**

United States Housing and Urban  
Development

United States Internal Revenue Service  
Low Income Taxpayer Clinic

### **\$50,000 - \$99,999**

Buckeye Hills Regional Council – Title III

Muskingum Valley Health Centers

Ohio State Bar Foundation

### **\$25,000 - \$49,999**

Area Agency on Aging District 7 – Title III

Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging –  
Title III

Fairfield County Board of Commissioners

Licking County Coalition for Housing

Licking County Foundation

Southern District of Ohio Federal Court

Supreme Court of Ohio

United Way of Knox County

### **\$10,000 - \$24,999**

AEP Foundation

Area Agency on Aging, Region 9,  
Title III

Athens County Foundation

City of Newark

HealthPath Foundation of Ohio

### **\$5,000-\$9,999**

Adams County Board of Commissioners

Patricia Forman

Dianne Goss, Memory of Jim Stremanos,  
Honor of Thomas W. Weeks, Thomas W.  
Weeks Legacy Fund

John Keifer

Knox County Foundation

Ohio State Bar Association, General Fund,  
Thomas W. Weeks Legacy

### **\$2,500-\$4,999**

Area Agency on Aging, Ohio District 5 –  
Title III

Carlile Patchen & Murphy LLP

Coshocton County Department of Job  
and Family Services

Marjorie B. Crowder, Honor of Thomas W.  
Weeks, Thomas W. Weeks Legacy Fund,  
Honor of James M. Daniels

Jeffrey and Jane Marx

### **\$1,000-\$2,499**

Cardinal Health

CareSource

Integrated Services for Behavioral Health

Jan Legg

Susan B. McGarvey

Gerald Anthony Mollica

Ronald J. Rees

John R. Stevenson

### **\$500-\$999**

1st Financial Bank

Mary Amos Augsburgers, General Fund,  
Memory of The Honorable  
Thomas J. Gerken

Stephen R. Buchenroth

Elizabeth and Jay Heiser

Kathryn Keller

Jonathan W. Marshall

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	Walter Chalfant Sr.	The Honorable Toni Lee Eddy	Lisa Harrison
<b>\$1-\$499</b>	Vicky Miller Christiansen	Rachel Escusa	The Honorable William and Magistrate Shelly Harsha, Memory of James D. Jensen
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Anonymous	Ellen M. Cordar	Ruth Fortney	Todd Hinerman, Memory of The Honorable Thomas J. Gerken
Anonymous, Honor of The Honorable Edward O'Farrell	John Corlett	Franklyn Joseph Fragomene	Heather Hostetler
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Jan Biederman	Donna E. Davis	Julie Golden	Donald H. Kennedy
Jane A. Bole	David Descutner	Lynn Greer	Sara Jane Keskula
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	Mike Dreitzler	Amanda Haick Everitt	

Jared Klaus, Memory of The Honorable Thomas J. Gerken	Kathleen McGarvey and Edward Forman	Kristine Parker	The Columbus Foundation
	Sandy McGrath	Callie Query	Robin Todhunter
The Honorable David Lee Landefeld, Memory of The Honorable Thomas J. Gerken	John Keith McHenry	Tom Rall	Shiloh Todorov
	Robert A. McKim	Gabby Reissland	Susan Tomasky
Mariah Larsen	Rhonda Lee Mears	Anne Rubin	Mitchell Trucco, Memory of The Honorable Thomas J. Gerken
Merilie Larsen	Sheana Mershon	Elissa Schneider	
Joseph and Shirley Latour	Gretchen Metzelaars	Marianne Seal	Sherri Tyree
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