Cover photo: Linda Prysock was one of about 150 tenants evacuated from a Columbus apartment building on Christmas Day due to unsafe conditions.

Inside cover photo: Designed by Alan Jazack, the JUSTICE mural honors some of Ohio’s social justice legends. It is located at the corner of Broad Street and Cleveland Avenue at Washington Gladden Social Justice Park in Columbus.
Our Mission:
LASC provides civil legal aid and advocacy to combat unfairness and injustice and to help people rise out of poverty.
Friends:

Across Central Ohio in 2022, the Legal Aid Society of Columbus (LASC) provided direct legal representation and advocacy that improved housing stability, increased financial security, enhanced family safety, and protected the health of our clients. These legal services are essential in the fight against poverty.

Thanks to the continued strong support of our partners, we were able to increase our representation of tenants in eviction court, helping more individuals and families maintain stable housing. We also achieved notable successes in ensuring that landlords were held responsible for poor housing conditions that threatened the health and safety of their tenants. This includes ongoing representation of more than 100 tenants who had to vacate the Latitude Five25 apartment complex on Christmas Day due to horrific conditions. Further, we have expanded our work with Central Ohio's growing immigrant population, with a focus on their often unfair treatment by bad acting landlords, as well as helping clients like Somali immigrant Fatuma Issack, who was facing eviction due to a housing authority paperwork error.

In 2022, we saw continued success in helping our clients obtain financial security, including shutting down predatory used car lots and holding accountable home repair and other businesses who take advantage of those living in poverty. In one such case, the magistrate awarded our client, BreAnthony Paul, a full refund plus damages, with an order prohibiting the dealership from selling cars in Ohio.

We also helped people break the cycle of poverty by relieving debt and allowing for long-term financial growth. Our Neighborhood Stabilization project supports these goals by representing startups, small businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Our re-entry work allowed individuals to seal prior criminal records, providing opportunities for financial self-sufficiency and security. Our Tax Team resolved IRS matters that caused clients like Tanya N. Delly undue stress and kept them from getting needed refunds. She said addressing her tax issue gave her “a whole new start.”

We are so grateful to our funders, our partners, and our staff for all they contributed in 2022. With your support, we look forward to another year using legal advocacy to reduce poverty and increase opportunities in our shared community.

Sincerely,

**Janica Pierce Tucker**  
LASC Board Chair

**Kathleen C. McGarvey**  
Executive Director
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25,521
PERSONS HELPED IN 2022

13,977
ADULTS & SENIORS

11,544
CHILDREN

21
PERCENT
CLIENTS WHO WERE SENIORS

22
PERCENT
CLIENTS IDENTIFIED AS HAVING A DISABILITY

4
PERCENT
CLIENTS WHO WERE VETERANS
"I am very grateful for Legal Aid’s work on my behalf. I could not afford this service otherwise! Thanks to everyone from the intake staff to the attorney who helped me!"

– LASC client
Amid Rising Rents, LASC Helps Clients Push Landlords to Make Needed Repairs, Address Unsafe Conditions

Times are hard for low-income tenants in Columbus. During the COVID-19 pandemic, median rent increased by about 16 percent, which further reduced already-scarce affordable housing options. Emergency rental assistance, which kept many families afloat during the pandemic, has largely dried up and eviction filings have reached historic highs.

More than ever, Columbus tenants have looked to Legal Aid for help. In 2022, we assisted 1,428 households with their eviction cases through our daily Tenant Advocacy Project (TAP) clinic at Franklin County Municipal Court.

Other clients sought help because the only housing they could afford was in disrepair, unsafe due to bug and mold infestations, or managed by neglectful owners and companies. “Tenants are often so desperate for housing that they stay in properties with unsafe or unhealthy conditions and are hesitant to complain to the landlord or call code enforcement for fear of retaliation,” said Advocacy Director Ben Horne.

Many tenants living in poor conditions do not have the option of moving because landlords often require large deposits and multiple months of rent to secure a unit, added Paralegal Meda Brittman. “Many people who call us are trapped,” she said. “They don’t have the money to go anywhere else, and even if they did, there aren’t affordable places to go.”

Legal Aid has sought out funding opportunities and established partnerships that help us address poorly maintained rental properties with the goal of bettering living conditions for renters, improving the housing stock in Columbus, and preserving affordable housing opportunities.

For example, our 43228 Project, which involves key community partners working to improve health and education outcomes in Columbus’ Hilltop neighborhood, has resulted in work to address poor housing conditions. The project allowed us to provide legal support and resources to tenants living in a large complex with a long history of health and safety violations. In 2022, the City of Columbus awarded us a Community Development Block Grant that funds our efforts to push landlords to make needed repairs and address pests and other issues.

“Using legal tools for tenants like rent escrow or calling code enforcement to encourage landlords to maintain their properties not only ensures safe and sanitary conditions for Columbus renters but also helps ensure that such properties remain part of the affordable housing stock in Columbus,” Horne said. “We’re lucky to work with a number of community organizations that are committed to helping improve rental conditions in our city.”

Wanda Brazell escrowed her rent for several months until she was ready to move from an apartment that had pest, plumbing, and electrical issues. With help from Attorney Michael Eggiman, she got her money released and moved to a much better place. “Michael went above and beyond,” she said. “He made me feel like we could get through this. I felt like his only client.”
Fellowship Assists Immigrants, Migrants and Refugees with Housing Concerns

Jones Day/Procter & Gamble Equal Justice Works Fellow Jesse Vogel leads our efforts to help recent immigrants who encounter landlords who take advantage of them. Vogel, who launched three new clinics since starting his project in September, partners with organizations to address the legal needs of immigrants, migrants, and refugees trying to maintain their housing. Vogel works with groups that serve Columbus’ Somali, Ethiopian, Bhutanese-Nepali, and Hispanic communities, among others.

Through these efforts, Legal Aid has strengthened our ability to challenge unfair practices in our city, including landlords who charge unauthorized fees, refuse to make needed repairs, unlawfully keep security deposits, take advantage of language barriers, discriminate against renters, and fail to credit tenants for rent they paid.

In the fall, Vogel and members of the Housing Team met with Somali residents from two apartment complexes who were struggling to get needed repairs. The attorneys explained the rent escrow process and helped tenants write letters to their landlords outlining maintenance and repair issues. “We explained that under Ohio law, a landlord has a duty to make sure their property is safe and habitable,” Vogel said.

Following the letter campaign, repairs were made at one of the complexes. Legal Aid is continuing to work with tenants at the other location and exploring other legal options. The process has helped the tenants feel connected to one another and strengthened ties with Legal Aid, Vogel said. “That’s a big piece of this. Helping them build connections and feel empowered to stand up and say, ‘This isn’t right.’”

TAP BY THE NUMBERS

TAP prevented 362 evictions.

In 417 cases TAP negotiated move out agreements, allowing families more time to move and find new stable housing.

TAP got 189 eviction cases dismissed.

Between December 2019 and December 2021, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Ohio's five most populous counties increased between 15% & 18%, according to data from Zillow.

But median household incomes in Ohio increased by just 6% between those years, according to census data.
Housing Team Resolves Payment Issues, Stops Eviction

When Fatuma Issack got an eviction notice claiming that she was behind in rent, she knew something was wrong. The single mother, who receives rent assistance through a Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher, always paid her rent. Although she made multiple visits to the housing authority that oversees the program, she was unable to resolve the problem on her own.

She then contacted Legal Aid because we had previously helped her with a housing conditions issue. Attorney Jesse Vogel determined that due to organizational challenges, the agency had mistakenly unenrolled her from the program, meaning it was no longer paying its portion of her rent. The situation was made worse because the housing authority did not offer language assistance to Issack, whose primary language is Somali.

Vogel explained the situation to Issack’s landlord and convinced the housing authority that they were responsible for the unpaid rent. When the agency paid the balance, the landlord dismissed the eviction, allowing Issack and her family to keep their apartment.

“I was so worried. I was not sleeping,” she said. “You helped me so fast. I am so happy that these good people are here to help.”

LASC Helps Tenants After Christmas Day Evacuation

When a days-long power outage in Columbus in July damaged the elevators at the Latitude Five25 apartment complex, formerly known as the Sawyer Towers apartment complex, Edwin Daniel contacted Legal Aid for help. He told Attorney Graham Bowman that he needed medical attention following a recent surgery, but could not navigate the stairs from his ninth-floor apartment.

Bowman immediately went to work trying to get help for Daniel, ultimately coordinating with the Columbus City Attorney’s office and the fire department to help carry him down the nine flights of stairs and get the care he needed.

“He was in a lot of pain. He was scared,” Bowman said. “He didn’t know how he was going to get out of the building.”

Upon learning that the elevators had been out for weeks, Bowman began meeting with other tenants and sharing details with city officials about the horrible conditions at the buildings, including no running water, broken elevators, pests, crime, and garbage littering the property.

The pair of towers on the city’s East Side, which opened as public housing...
In 1963, are an iconic landmark and served as a vital part of the city’s social safety net until they were sold in 2009 and began to fall into disrepair. The apartments changed hands again in 2021 and conditions got worse.

Legal Aid hosted a Know Your Rights event for residents in October, and Bowman helped tenants escrow their rent and document problems with their units. “I was incredibly worried that the building’s shoddy mechanical systems and poor maintenance would cause some sort of widespread disaster when the weather grew colder,” Bowman said.

On December 23, several pipes froze and burst in the building, damaging the electrical and heating systems. When repairs were not made, the city evacuated 154 tenant families to a recreation center on Christmas Day. It was traumatic, said 71-year-old tenant Linda Prysock, who had lived in the building for more than a decade.

“Graham Bowman called me and told me to put something warm on and gather some things. He said that code enforcement was going to come and tell us to get out of the building because it’s not safe,” she recalled. “I looked out the window and saw the COTA buses and thought, ‘Oh my God, they are coming to evacuate us.’ What a way to spend Christmas.”

In the days after the evacuation, Bowman worked closely with City and Franklin County officials. Although the situation was scary, Prysock took comfort in having Bowman in her corner. “He looks out for us. He always says, ‘Call me if you need something.’ He always keeps us informed about what’s happening.”

**Editor’s note:**

In February 2023, the Columbus Environmental Court found building owner Paxe Latitude in contempt and imposed sanctions. Judge Stephanie Mingo ordered the company to deposit a bond of $2.5 million to compensate tenants.

Mingo criticized the company for failing to maintain a safe and habitable building. “The subpar conditions that have plagued the property prior to this court case were completely preventable. The traumatic emergency evacuation of the tenants on Christmas Day 2022 was a direct result of the severe and gross neglect of ownership and management.”

Legal Aid is working to ensure that tenants receive the compensation they are due.
Economic Justice Team Work Helps Consumers Confront Predatory Business Practices

By focusing on direct legal representation and big-picture advocacy efforts, the Legal Aid Economic Justice Team helps clients build financial security by preventing foreclosures, securing bankruptcy relief, and stopping predatory businesses. In 2022, much of their work centered on challenging auto and lending fraud that can trap people in a cycle of poverty.

The cycle begins when a person without savings or a strong credit history needs a car to get to work, school, or other obligations. Too often, consumers turn to used car lots offering “buy-here-pay-here” and other questionable financing deals. “These dealers prey on desperate customers—particularly with the recent supply chain shortages—and often sell defective cars at exorbitant prices with hidden fees and interest rates approaching 25 percent,” said Pat Skilliter, who manages the Economic Justice Team. “In many cases the car breaks down within a week of the sale, leaving the buyer with loan payments and no vehicle.”

If the buyer stops paying on the car, the dealer can repossess it and take the buyer to court to collect the debt. If the buyer does not have legal representation, the lender likely will win, and the court will impose a wage garnishment. At this point, the person is without a vehicle, has another negative mark on their credit, and has even less ability to save. With few choices, some consumers purchase another vehicle from another bad car lot. And the cycle continues.

In recent years, the team has had success with consumer protection cases against several businesses. In addition to awarding our clients money judgments, the courts ordered the businesses to stop breaking the law and, in a few cases, stop doing business altogether, Skilliter said.

“We help clients get relief from these illegal transactions and, hopefully, stop the vicious cycle of collections,” he said. “The work also prevents the businesses from victimizing others.”

The Economic Justice Team has represented several clients in cases related to used car sales.
Before turning to Legal Aid, BreAnthony Paul spent two months trying to get help from the car lot that sold him a shoddy used Cadillac. The first time the car broke down—less than a week after he purchased it—the salesman sent a mechanic to his house to fix it. When it broke down a few days later, the salesman had it towed to the car lot and gave him a loaner car that also had mechanical problems.

Paul, who was fired from his job because he called off work after the first breakdown left him stranded on the highway, tried many times to get the car lot to fix the Cadillac and return it to him. “They didn’t care about what was happening to me,” he said. “They gave me every excuse in the book.”

With no resolution in sight, Paul called Legal Aid. Attorney Pat Skilliter began investigating the sale and found many consumer protection violations, including that the car lot told Paul they were selling him the vehicle, but had him sign lease papers. The car lot and salesman also did not tell Paul that they did not have the title to the Cadillac and that it was a salvage vehicle that could not legally be driven in Ohio, among other issues.

Skilliter filed a lawsuit in Franklin County Common Pleas Court and asked that the car dealer refund Paul for the deposit, payments he made on the car, lost wages, and the cost of renting a car. A magistrate found in Paul’s favor and awarded him $35,000. The magistrate also ordered that the car salesman and the car lot could no longer sell cars in Ohio.

“My attorney did a great job,” Paul said. “He helped me and helped make sure this doesn’t happen to someone else.”

To ensure that Paul could collect on the judgment, Skilliter filed a judgment lien and foreclosure against the scammer’s home. “By that point, the dealer apparently decided he’d scammed enough people and fled the country,” Skilliter explained. When the home was sold to pay off debts, Paul collected his money.

“Cases like this are exciting because they not only put money back into the hands of our clients, they also hold fraudulent businesses accountable,” Skilliter said. “The Economic Justice Team will continue to take cases like this and find creative ways to ensure that clients get paid. We’re trying to send the message that Legal Aid will step in when businesses take advantage of hardworking consumers.”
Advocacy Eliminates $10,000 Tax Debt

Attorney Kathy Hoover (left) helped Tanya N. Delly (right) with a tax matter.

Excellent and helpful. I was very satisfied with the help I received concerning my case.

— LASC client
Tax Team Resolves IRS Issues, Eases Client Worries

Legal Aid benefits from a number of innovative partnerships that allow our Tax Team to reach more clients, participate in trainings, and connect taxpayers with quality resources. Our partners include the United Way of Central Ohio’s Tax Time, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Center for Taxpayer Rights.

In 2022, the team sent letters to households at risk of missing out on the Child Tax Credit, helped refugee and immigrant families prevent tax problems, and presented more than 20 Facebook Live “Tax Chat” segments covering important tax topics for small business owners and low-income taxpayers.

At the request of Community Refugee and Immigration Services (CRIS), Legal Aid assisted a group of Afghan parolee families with correcting erroneously prepared tax returns. In April, the team filed requests for extensions of the filing deadline for the clients. Three months later, the team held a daylong clinic to prepare revised returns. With help from volunteers, Legal Aid prepared returns for 25 individuals and families.

“The day was a great success,” said Megan Sullivan, who manages the Tax Team. “The effort helped preserve more than $100,000 in refunds and made sure that the refugee families’ tax compliance histories are clean in case they want to apply for citizenship.”

LASC social media posts highlight tips for taxpayers.
Partnerships Lead to Culturally Appropriate Services for Domestic Violence Survivors

Recognizing how critically important cultural understanding is to aiding survivors of domestic violence, Legal Aid collaborates with numerous organizations that serve Central Ohio’s immigrant and refugee populations, as well as others with limited English proficiency. The partnerships improve our advocacy and help lessen the trauma our clients experience, said Family Law Team Managing Attorney Stuart Itani.

“We appreciate and rely upon the expertise of our partners to help us provide efficient legal services in a culturally appropriate way,” he said. “These relationships allow us to achieve a deeper level of client trust.”

The team works closely with a variety of organizations, including ASHA-Ray of Hope, a nonprofit organization that serves immigrant victims and survivors, particularly from South Asian backgrounds; Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services, a nonprofit aimed at empowering refugees from around the globe; and the Ohio Hispanic Coalition, which provide services to the region’s Latino and Hispanic communities.

These organizations educate our staff about cultural norms and traditions and help us explain how the court system operates, Itani said. “We recognize how important these advocates are to the success of the case,” he said. “Our legal expertise is just one part of the puzzle.”

Working together, the organizations have solved some very complex legal cases, said Shantha Balaswamy, board president and client services chair. “We owe the successes to both parties challenging each other, not giving up, going back to the drawing board when needed, communicating with clients with honesty, respecting client’s self-determination, and at the heart of it all, always prioritizing the client’s best interest.”

Family Law Team Managing Attorney Stuart Itani meets with Shantha Balaswamy, board president of ASHA-Ray of Hope.
Family Law Team Focuses on Providing Holistic Services

Despite the pandemic and cuts to domestic violence prevention funding, Legal Aid continues to provide holistic, trauma-informed legal services to survivors. Legal Aid was well positioned to adapt to these challenges because of our involvement with the CHOICES Collaborative Board and a variety of anti-violence task forces in the Marion service area.

Legal Aid collaborates with these organizations to streamline referrals, manage court processes and share information. “The goal is to provide better service and reduce the trauma that domestic violence survivors experience as they navigate the court system,” said Staci Thomas, managing attorney for the Marion office.

Staff from our Columbus and Marion offices work with victim advocates throughout the service area and make regular visits to area shelters to meet with residents. “Our relationship with Legal Aid allows us to make direct referrals, which help survivors access services more easily,” added Abbey Larson of the Marion Victim Assistance Program.

Managing Attorney Staci Thomas (left), Attorney Shelli Clark (center) and Abbey Larson (right) of the Marion Victim Assistance Program discuss client services at the Marion office.
2022 Revenue

$9,230,000

- Grants: 94.9%
- Contributions: 7.9%
- Investment Income: -4.9%
- Other: 2.1%

100.0%

2022 Expenses

$9,620,000

- Legal Program: 89.7%
- General & Administrative: 8.7%
- Fundraising: 1.6%

100.0%
Awards

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY MORITZ COLLEGE OF LAW presented Executive Director Kathleen McGarvey with The George V. Voinovich Humanitarian Award in recognition of her work on behalf of low-income Ohioans. The award is given annually to an alum or friend of the college who has devoted significant time and energy to causes and projects that benefit the greater community and the welfare of humanity.

UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE ACTION NETWORK honored Kathleen McGarvey as an Outstanding Leader for Health Care during the agency’s Lend Your Voice – Health Care for All event. McGarvey was selected because of her commitment and tireless work to keep Ohioans healthy and to protect and provide equity and access to affordable, quality health care for everyone, particularly those who are marginalized.

Director of Pro Bono & Community Engagement Dianna Parker received the 2022 SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY AWARD from the Milo-Grogan Area Commission. The award recognizes community members who make Columbus and Franklin County a better place. Parker received the award for her work on the Franklin County Record Sealing and Expungement Clinic.
Thanks to the following people and organizations for providing their time, talent, and treasure to LASC. We appreciate every person who made time in their busy schedules to assist our clients and/or who graciously included us in their giving plan to support our mission of pursuing justice and changing lives. Your gifts increase our ability to provide life-changing legal aid to clients.

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“Today, the ability to afford legal representation carries the day. Civil legal aid levels the playing field and prevents the wheels of justice from becoming a gristmill for the rights of those not able to afford lawyers or obtain fair and equal access to the system.”

— Christopher Lardiere, LASC pro bono attorney
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Many of the people we meet have had no advantage, no help, no leg up in this world. So much of what we do is listen with a compassionate, thoughtful ear. My goal is to demonstrate respect and compassion and empower each individual to stand up for their legal rights regardless of background.”

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