



LEGAL AID
FOUNDATION
OF LOS ANGELES

Justice • Equity • Hope

2021

ANNUAL REPORT



Dear Friends and Supporters,

The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles has been a stalwart advocate for Angelenos living in poverty for more than 90 years. During the worst public health disaster in more than a century, we rose to the challenge of continuing to provide quality, free civil legal services to those in need. In doing so, the year 2021 proved to be a transformative moment for LAFLA: when we nimbly met the evolving needs of our communities, while staying true to our values and mission.

The pandemic laid bare the structural inequities that characterize so many of our institutions, including the judicial system, keeping communities of color in poverty for generations. We fought to dismantle those systems and challenge the laws and policies that uphold those institutions — achieving successes for individual clients in the courtroom and entire communities in policy decisions. We stood up for low-income tenants whose landlords harassed them, trying to force them to move; for workers who lost their jobs and could not claim unemployment benefits, because they could not speak to a government worker in their language; for former students whose for-profit colleges suddenly closed, leaving them with thousands of dollars in student loan debt and no degree; and many more people in vulnerable situations who simply needed someone to advocate for them.

The pandemic has also highlighted the resilience and passion of our staff and volunteers, who fought every day for equal justice — even while our offices were closed and briefly reopened, before closing again due to the Omicron variant. Our advocates spent countless hours contending with challenging situations (including court closures and the digital divide) and navigating complicated laws and policies, to provide the best service possible for our clients and community members. Our staff and volunteers' tenacity, creativity, and brilliance have never been more evident.

While the year 2021 proved to be extraordinarily difficult in many respects, we are stronger because of it. We thank you for reading our 2021 Annual Report, where we reflect upon our progress and recognize the many positive strides we have made together.

In solidarity,



Silvia R. Argueta
Executive Director



Michael Maddigan
President, LAFLA Board 2020-2022

ACCOMPLISHMENTS



STAY HOUSED L.A.

In its first full year, LAFLA continued to serve as the lead contractor for Stay Housed L.A., a City- and County-funded eviction prevention and defense program for low-income tenants. The partnership comprises 10 legal service providers and 15 community-based organizations. Specifically, LAFLA's Eviction Defense Center staff represented tenants in eviction court, provided counsel and advice at clinics, and educated tenants about their rights. In 2021, Stay Housed L.A. reached out to 425,000 tenants, held 353 workshops and clinics with 9,299 attendees, and provided 5,084 tenant households with legal services.

TENANT ANTI-HARASSMENT ORDINANCE

LAFLA worked in close partnership with community partners on the passage of the Los Angeles City Tenant Anti-Harassment Ordinance (TAHO). The ordinance, which went into effect on August 6, 2021, applies to all residential units in the City of Los Angeles, and prohibits landlords from harassing tenants by doing certain acts, such as making threats of physical harm or removing housing services, or refusing to do certain acts, such as make repairs or accept rent payments.



**FIGHTING
• FOR •
TENANTS**

LAUNCH OF TENANT SMALL CLAIMS PROJECT

Starting November 1, 2021, landlords can sue tenants for rent that was deferred during the pandemic "protected period" spanning from March 2020 through September 2021 in small claims court. **The Tenant Small Claims (TSC) Project assists tenants sued in small claims court with reviewing small claims court documents and assisting tenants to prepare defenses and evidence to present in the small claims hearing, where litigants must represent themselves.** LAFLA's TSC Project, in partnership with OneJustice, also has created training and clinic materials to help legal service providers replicate this small claims tenants assistance model throughout the state. The TSC Project also provides webinars for tenants to learn how to utilize small claims court to sue or countersue their landlord for violations of their tenants' rights.

L.A. COUNTY AFGHAN REFUGEE TASKFORCE



Given LAFLA's experience working with refugees and those seeking asylum, the newly created Los Angeles County Afghan Refugee Taskforce invited LAFLA to participate in 2021. The County organized the taskforce in response to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, which caused tens of thousands of Afghans to flee — many of them to Southern California. As part of the taskforce, LAFLA has provided direct legal assistance to qualifying Afghan nationals and helped plan a pilot welcome center for Afghan nationals opening in 2022.

HELPING FORMER INMATES BECOME PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTERS

LAFLA partnered with the Fire Forestry Recruitment Program (FFRP) to assist those eligible for AB 2147, a form of relief that allows formerly incarcerated people who served their sentences through fire camp to apply for expungement. LAFLA has hosted pro bono clinics in partnership with FFRP and taken cases on an individual basis. The *Los Angeles Times* highlighted our work with FFRP twice in 2021, including an article in June entitled, “Why is it still so hard for former prisoners to become firefighters in California?”



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE REMOTE HEARING STUDIO



LAFLA continued to develop and provide the remote hearing studio for survivors to make virtual appearances for their domestic violence restraining order hearings.

The remote hearing studio provides survivors who lack reliable technology or internet connections a safe, supportive, and private space in which to appear for restraining order hearings without having to face their abusers in person. Housed within a Family Justice Center where LAFLA works in collaboration with other advocacy organizations and agencies, the studio also offers survivors access to counseling, transportation,

and other supportive services. In 2021, several of LAFLA's clients appeared for their hearings, including a hearing with a witness, from the remote hearing studio. They noted that they felt safe, supported and warmly greeted by LAFLA and the Family Justice Center staff. LAFLA aims to continue growing the remote hearing studio to provide safe spaces for survivors, to bridge the digital divide, and to expand access to justice for clients.

MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIPS SERVE VULNERABLE PATIENTS DURING PANDEMIC



In 2021, LAFLA's four medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) continued to navigate the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure vulnerable patients had meaningful access to legal services. The Children's Clinic MLP, which serves vulnerable patients in the greater Long Beach area, celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2021. Additionally, LAFLA's three MLPs in the

Medical-Legal Community Partnership (MCLP) — Martin Luther King, Jr. Outpatient Center, Coastal Health Centers, and Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center — continued to serve L.A. County Department of Health Services patients remotely, pivoting to a hybrid service model once stay-at-home mandates lifted. The Rancho MLP team led all of the on-site MLP locations within the MCLP, which includes other legal service providers, in terms of the number of cases opened in 2021: more than 650. The *Los Angeles Times* and national Telemundo and Univision networks also profiled our MCLP clinics in their 2021 coverage.

NEW DIRECTOR ROLES

LAFLA reorganized its leadership team, adding several new director roles to address the changing needs of the organization. LAFLA created several new director positions, including the Director of Housing Justice and the Director of Community and Economic Justice. LAFLA also added a Director of Racial Justice and Equity role to guide the organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion work alongside the Director of Human Resources, Diversity and Inclusion; and a Director of Client Access and Compliance role to oversee the ways in which LAFLA connects with clients and community members, as well as compliance matters.



PROVIDING PRO BONO SERVICES REMOTELY

In 2021, LAFLA's pro bono projects engaged more than 550 volunteers made up of attorneys, law students, undergraduate students, interpreters, community volunteers, and many others. These volunteers contributed more than 23,000 hours, valued at more than \$10 million, to help expand LAFLA's services to help meet the legal needs of the community. During the pandemic, pro bono volunteers went out of their way to represent tenants facing homelessness, domestic violence survivors trapped with their abusers, victims of crime seeking refuge in the U.S., previously incarcerated individuals hoping to clear their records, and many others. Also, LAFLA hosted numerous remote, volunteer-led legal clinics to serve the community as in-person clinics slowly opened. LAFLA is grateful to be able to call upon its many supportive pro bono partners during times of need.

CLOSED-SCHOOL STUDENT LOAN DISCHARGES

A senior LAFLA attorney, who is a national expert in student loan matters, and a LAFLA client testified before a Congressional subcommittee

regarding the Department's refusal to grant automatic student loan discharges to students harmed by sudden school closures as well as the impact on low-income borrowers. After the testimony, the Department agreed to consider amending the regulations to allow automatic closed-school discharges in a negotiated rulemaking proceeding that was just starting. In the proceeding, the LAFLA attorney drafted a proposal, which the legal aid negotiators proposed and successfully convinced the Department to agree to, providing for mandatory closed-school discharges retroactively for borrowers whose schools closed after 1985. LAFLA is now waiting for the Department to publish proposed regulations.



你好

Hello

¡Hola!

FIGHT FOR LANGUAGE JUSTICE

LAFLA responded to gaps in social and legal services for speakers of languages other than English, which the pandemic revealed and exacerbated. In 2021, LAFLA and partner organizations engaged in extensive mediation with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) and Employment Development Department (EDD), over the latter's failure to provide adequate language access for individuals seeking unemployment benefits and resources (resulting in a settlement in early 2022). In 2021, LAFLA also filed a DFEH complaint over the California Department of Social Services' (CDSS') failure to provide meaningful language access in the administration of the Pandemic-EBT (food assistance) program tied to school closures. As a result, CDSS greatly improved its language access through expanded language lines and translations of its materials in the second round of P-EBT issuances.

LAFLA'S 90TH ANNIVERSARY SYMPOSIUM

LAFLA hosted its first-ever virtual symposium in February 2021, *The Next 100 Years: Advancing Racial Justice & Empowering Communities*.

Through a series of panels, the symposium explored the intersection of racial justice and LAFLA's work across the spectrum of public interest law. The event brought together members of the legal community and social justice advocates to participate in critical conversations about some of the most pressing issues impacting underserved communities – particularly in the wake of the pandemic and the nation's reckoning with systemic racism. The panels were: *Racial Justice and the Delivery of Legal Services*; *Housing Justice is Racial Justice*; and *Health, Race, and the Way Forward*.



SERVICES

ASIAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER (API) COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROJECT:

Provides linguistically accessible, culturally intelligent, trauma-informed help to API clients in their preferred language, with access to all LAFLA services.

ECONOMIC STABILITY WORKGROUP:

Government benefits — Helps people obtain benefits to fulfill basic needs (food, shelter, medical care, and services to attain self-sufficiency). **Employment** — Fights wage theft and denial of unemployment insurance benefits. Advises on wrongful terminations and discriminatory employment practices. **Student loans** — Helps people who cannot afford to repay their student loans due to disability or who have attended for-profit colleges that engaged in predatory, deceptive, or illegal practices.

EVICITION DEFENSE CENTER:

Provides housing rights information and direct representation for individuals facing eviction. Prevents housing-subsidy residents and Section 8 voucher holders from losing their housing and/or subsidies. Preserves Rent Stabilized Ordinance (RSO) tenancies and prevents RSO violations. Helps clients living in uninhabitable conditions get repairs or reductions in rent. Provides eviction defense resources to tenants through Stay Housed L.A. partnership.

HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES WORKGROUP:

Engages a movement-lawyering approach to prevent unfair displacement and preserve and expand affordable housing. Deploys legal strategies in partnership with the community to defend the rights of unhoused individuals and families and provide legal support to community-based organizations seeking to build healthy, economically vibrant communities.

MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIPS:

Provides patients with access to legal services — focusing on those that can negatively impact the health of patients, such as poor housing conditions, loss or denial of public benefits, and violence within the home.

PREVENTING AND ENDING HOMELESSNESS PROGRAM:

Provides legal services to households facing homelessness and/or imminent eviction, as well as unhoused individuals and families, in the South Bay/Harbor area and southeast Los Angeles County.

RESTORING COMMUNITIES WORKGROUP:

Provides legal assistance to reentry for individuals in various substantive areas including but not limited to housing, benefits, and record clearing. Removes barriers to reentry and housing and housing stability, so people can have a fresh start and better access to work and housing opportunities.

SANTA MONICA COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP:

Provides legal services to the Santa Monica client community in the areas of housing and homelessness, tenant harassment, domestic violence, family law, and public benefits. **Tenant Small Claims Project** — Provides resources and support to tenants sued in small claims court for COVID-19 rental debt, including workshops and seminars. Assists tenants in suing their landlords in small claims court for violation of their tenants' rights. Represents some tenants in small claims court appeals.

SELF-HELP LEGAL ACCESS CENTERS:

Assists individuals who represent themselves (regardless of income or immigration status). Offers legal information, help with preparing court forms, and guidance on a variety of civil legal matters. Provides referrals to private attorneys or legal services programs as needed.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES WORKGROUP:

Domestic Violence — Helps and represents survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in obtaining restraining orders, and orders for custody, dissolution, visitation, and support. **Immigration** — Assists and represents survivors of domestic violence, torture, human trafficking, and other serious abuse in removal proceedings and before U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS). Helps and represents individuals before USCIS to become U.S. citizens. **Torture Survivors Project** — Provides legal assistance, representation, and community education to immigrants who are survivors of torture.



VETERANS JUSTICE CENTER:

Advocates on behalf of veterans to obtain life-sustaining income, health, and housing benefits. Dismisses tickets and expunges convictions so veterans can have a fresh start. Upgrades unjust less-than-honorable military discharges. Prevents veteran homelessness.

2021 IMPACT

554 volunteers



Hours of volunteer
service donated

23,954

100,000+

L.A. County residents received legal help
through LAFLA



Veterans served



595

Cases closed with
pro bono
involvement

301



People helped through
medical-legal partnerships



1,435

Clients
speak
29+
languages

23% of clients
have limited
English
proficiency



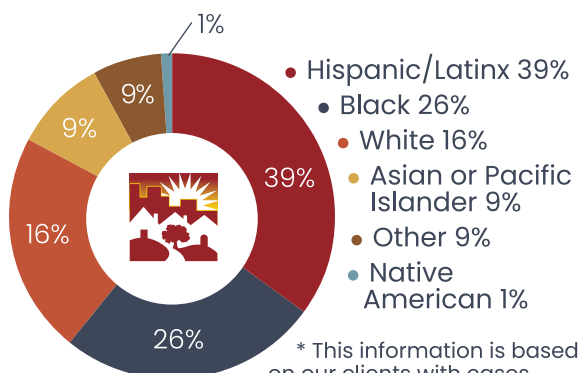
Amharic, Arabic, Armenian,
Bengali, Cantonese, English, Farsi,
French, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian,
Japanese, Khmer (Cambodian),
Korean, Mandarin, Mongolian,
Polish, Portuguese, Russian,
American Sign Language,
Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, Tigrinya,
Urdu, Vietnamese, Zapotec

12,105+

people helped
through self-help
legal access centers

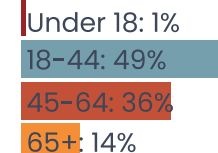


By Race/Ethnicity*

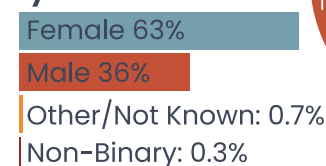


* This information is based on our clients with cases open in 2021

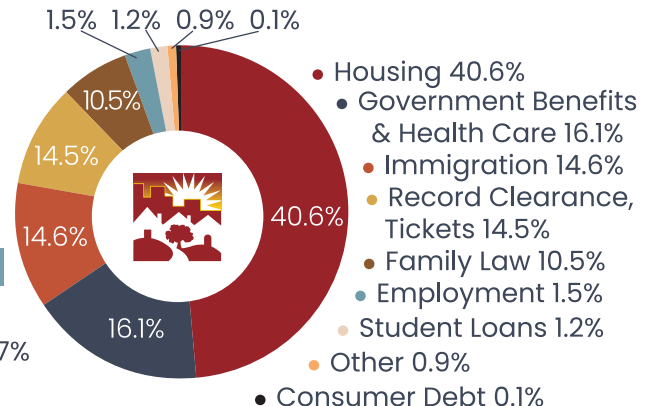
By Age*



By Gender*



By Legal Issue*



CLIENT VICTORIES



Unhoused Veteran Outed During Service Receives Full Benefits and Backpay from VA

Charles proudly served as a firefighter in the Air Force, largely to honor his father who was also a veteran: "He was my hero. I was following my family tradition in the military and was ahead of schedule with my goals. It was the last time I was happy in life."

During his final year of service in the early 1990s, one of Charles' coworkers outed him. Although the Air Force did not discharge Charles for being gay, he was essentially demoted, shunned from his unit, and faced frequent abuse, including death threats. "It changed me," said Charles. "I lived in isolation, afraid to meet people and make friends, because every single person who threatened and attacked me, I had known for years, got along with, and was friends with. The day they learned I was gay, I went into shock because of the instant hate I experienced."

This experience profoundly impacted Charles' mental health. He suffered from severe depression, which impaired his ability to work and even access mental health services due to a fear of stigma and reprisal for being gay. As a result, he struggled with homelessness for many years.

Eventually, Charles contacted LAFLA Veterans Justice Center (VJC) Attorney **Louis Truong** for help after the Veterans Administration (VA) had denied Charles' disability claim for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although the VA had found evidence of the reason why he might have PTSD, it concluded that Charles did not actually have PTSD.

"It's an uphill battle for low-income veterans, especially those who have been through traumatic situations, to successfully advocate for themselves," said Louis. "The VA benefit claims system makes it inherently difficult for veterans, particularly those with mental health issues, to go it alone due to the VA's complex rules and regulations regarding the claims application process and establishing service connection for mental health conditions. This is why VJC is dedicated to helping hundreds of veterans in situations similar to Charles' every year."

To help Charles with his appeal, Louis worked with both of his doctors to provide medical opinions to contradict the VA's conclusion. Louis submitted the appeal in March 2021, arguing that his mental health treatment records and his long-term doctors' opinions should outweigh VA evidence supporting the denial.

Three months later, the VA granted the appeal, giving Charles a 100% disability rating for PTSD and awarding him approximately \$60,000 in backpay. "With a 100% disability rating, Charles is entitled to a substantial monthly benefit," noted Louis. "This is a crucial lifeline for homeless veterans, particularly in Los Angeles as rents continue to rise."

Charles can now focus on stabilizing his housing situation, building a better future for himself, and helping others in need: "I enjoy helping the homeless community – giving water, food, and first aid. I was homeless for a while; I know they are human beings too. I started doing that again the day I got the decision. It brought me back to life."

CLIENT VICTORIES

Fighting Gentrification Through New Models of Homeownership

Zerita's activism grew from a desire to stand up for members of the community where she has lived most of her life. "Over 30 years, my parents, my children, and I have all faced evictions even though we have always paid our rent – at four different properties, all within the same neighborhood. I realized what was going on was not coincidental."



Zerita first came to LAFLA several years ago as a tenant organizer. The City Attorney had filed a nuisance abatement lawsuit against her South L.A. complex, claiming excessive criminal gang activity was taking place. She and other tenants represented by LAFLA intervened in the lawsuit, and successfully overturned it. Around this time, Zerita (pictured in the front row, in the middle) learned about the community land trust (CLT) model: "I went to school and became really interested [in the model] and embarked on self-study from there."

According to Attorney **Jonathan Jager** with LAFLA's Housing and Communities Workgroup, "CLTs buy a property and commit to never selling it – removing it from market forces that might otherwise encourage displacing tenants or redeveloping it in a speculative way. This gives the community flexibility in designing housing models that work for it, such as affordable rental housing or cooperative ownership. Providing lower-price entry points into the real estate market, plus removing any pressure to maximize profitability, means that low-income families can start building equity and wealth they've been historically denied."

Zerita and fellow organizers formed Liberty CLT, a Black-led, Black/Brown-focused group that covers neighborhoods in South LA and Mid-City. They joined the Los Angeles Community Land Trust Coalition, which also includes Beverly-Vermont CLT, El Sereno CLT, T.R.U.S.T. South LA, and Fideicomiso Comunitario Tierra Libre – the last of which is co-led by LAFLA Client Eligible Board Member **Fanny Ortiz**. All the CLTs are led by people of color.

"It's all about nondisplacement," Zerita said. "All the work we've been doing is to preserve and protect community members and families."

In late 2020, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors approved a \$14 million pilot program to fund CLTs. "When the pandemic started, it was immediately obvious that the economic fallout could lead to a repeat of 2008, when so many families lost their homes and neighborhoods were decimated," noted Jonathan. "The L.A. Community Land Trust Coalition quickly realized their model of community ownership could help stabilize and preserve existing residents in at-risk neighborhoods. The Coalition came to LAFLA for help in designing the pilot program. Thanks to flexible and committed leadership from county officials, we were able to design a program and negotiate a grant agreement that removed a lot of the red tape that otherwise might have prevented something like this from happening."

Liberty CLT was part of the program's inception and, as soon as the pilot was approved, "We hit the ground running," said Zerita. "With LAFLA's help, we developed a partnership with a local community development corporation to assist us with property ownership and management. LAFLA also helped us as we worked through the real estate deal. Within two weeks of obtaining our tax-exempt status, we closed on our first property. It was really great."

By the end of the pilot program, the Coalition had altogether acquired 43 units in less than a year, putting 110 individuals on a path to eventually buying their apartments from the CLTs as a type of affordable co-op.

"This work is really important, and I'm glad I've found a lot of like-minded individuals, including attorneys who understand the movement and utilize their education and expertise to help us stop this ongoing eviction machine that's causing homelessness, and everything that's mixed up in that – including determinants of health and the trauma of being displaced," added Zerita. "Development can happen without displacing the people already living there. When you put the community first, everybody wins."

CLIENT VICTORIES



LAFLA Helps Student Victimized by For-Profit School Clear Debt

Ramon was excited to finally pursue his dream of working in Hollywood: “I always had a camera in my hand ever since I was a kid.” He learned about a for-profit school that claimed to provide training for film careers. Before he enrolled, the school assured him that Federal Pell Grants and GI Bill funds (he is a veteran) would cover the entire cost of his program, and he would not need to take out any student loans.

However, Ramon soon faced difficulties getting the school to pay him the funds owed from his Pell Grant and GI Bill benefits for living expenses: “They kept giving me excuses as to why it was being withheld. One semester turned into several, and they kept saying I would get a big lump sum later.” By the end of the program, the school had only given him \$300 in financial aid funds, and still owed him approximately \$3,000.

When Ramon was unable to find a job after he graduated, the school convinced him to enroll in a second program, promising that a second degree would improve his job prospects. Administrators told him that the tuition and fees for the second program would likely be covered by the credit balance from the first program along with a remaining Pell Grant for which he was eligible. After he enrolled, however, the school still refused to pay him the living stipend due to him, which had increased to approximately \$5,000. “I didn’t know how I was going to make it, how I was going to pay rent each month,” said Ramon, whose freelance gigs were barely enough to get by. “I was prepared to pack everything up in my car and figure it out from there.”

Ramon noticed LAFLA’s East Los Angeles office during his commute one day and decided to seek help. LAFLA Director of Racial Justice and Equity **Tyler Press Sutherland** (who was a fellow at the time) immediately sprang into action, and wrote demand letters to the school, which eventually paid Ramon the living stipends he was owed. She also submitted a complaint to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) regarding the experiences of Ramon and another client, which sparked a federal investigation.

A few months later, when he had almost completed his program, Ramon received shocking news: A federal student loan statement showed the school had taken out more than \$23,000 worth of student loans in his name without his authorization. “It was unbelievable,” he said.

Around the same time, the school abruptly closed. “We have seen hundreds of clients who have attended schools that targeted immigrants, veterans, people of color, non-high school graduates, and other vulnerable populations with deceptive promises of high-quality vocational education that would lead to high-paying jobs,” said Senior Attorney **Robyn Smith** with LAFLA’s Economic Stability Workgroup, who took over Ramon’s case. “They have often suffered from decades of debt collection for student loans that ballooned in size.”

Because Ramon had not authorized the federal student loans, he submitted a false certification discharge application with LAFLA’s help, seeking full cancellation of the federal student loan loans — which the DOE summarily denied. “Unfortunately, the DOE very rarely grants false certification discharge applications, even when they are supported by the DOE’s own findings of school fraud,” noted Robyn. “As a result, most borrowers, like Ramon, need the help of legal aid attorneys who know how to obtain the evidence necessary to appeal an adverse decision, sometimes all the way to federal court. Without our assistance, defrauded borrowers remain fully liable for their federal student loans.”

After getting a copy of the DOE’s findings on the school’s illegal practices through multiple Freedom of Information Act requests, Robyn submitted an appeal. In December 2021, the DOE finally granted Ramon’s application and discharged his federal loans, canceling a balance that had grown to approximately \$26,000. It also refunded payments he had made and removed all negative credit history regarding the loans from his credit reports.

“Getting borrowers the debt cancellation to which they are entitled by federal law is an uphill battle requiring hours of work and one or more appeals,” said Robyn. “Ramon’s case is not unusual and demonstrates the need for widespread free student loan legal services.”

As for Ramon, he is grateful for the legal help he received, and excited for his professional prospects without the burden of student loan debt: “The pandemic was a big shock for the entertainment industry, but everything is now full steam ahead — there aren’t enough people to cover all the projects going on. Everything is the way I had always hoped for. I don’t know where I would be without LAFLA’s help.”

FINANCIALS

REVENUE & SUPPORT

Total Income \$33,196,113

Gov't Contracts \$27,379,172

Misc. Income \$4,231,392

Grants & Contributions \$826,636

Special Events \$758,913

TOTAL EXPENSES

Total Expenses \$29,835,358

Program \$25,292,319

Support \$4,272,683

Fundraising \$268,356

DONATED SERVICES

Expenses, Revenue, & Support
\$10,798,677

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Justice • Equity • Hope

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