



ANNUAL REPORT



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A NOTE FROM SMRLS CEO JESSIE NICHOLSON

As we emerge from pandemic era operations and come to terms with the "new normal", we are moving forward with lessons learned about our resilience as an organization, but more importantly, a new level of admiration and respect for the resilience of the people we serve. The pandemic pulled back the curtain on the glaring disparities in our communities and systems to care for and include the most vulnerable amongst us. And while temporary measures were put into place to avoid catastrophic consequences resulting from job loss, education disruptions, food insecurity, and housing instability, many of the stop-gap measures have ended or will be ending soon.

The impact on SMRLS has been both measurable and anecdotal. First, the numbers. SMRLS opened 11,325 new cases last year which is a 14% increase over the previous year, and the number of cases closed in 2022 was up 16%. Our housing cases saw the largest increase, 28%, over the previous year and the Education Legal Advocacy Project saw an increase in cases of 25%. Both are directly related to the longer-term impacts of Covid. Time after time our clients tell us how our advocacy has changed their lives, how they felt heard for the first time, and that they felt respected and valued.

Along with this growth, we have identified opportunities to increase capacity, accessibility, and outreach. Projects slated for 2023 include an overhaul of our website to improve the user experience and create a destination for information and access to services, increasing our use of social media to reach more people and build SMRLS public profile, and utilizing technology to provide a user-friendly way for clients to provide feedback about their experiences with SMRLS.

As always, our dedicated staff and volunteers continue to do more than ever. Legal aid remains a frontline service, required for many low-income Minnesotans to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. We still work each day to keep survivors free from their abusers, to make services and therapies accessible to children, and to make services and therapies accessible to children, and to make benefits accessible to those who need them.

We are meeting the increased demand head-on, thanks to the support of our community partners, donors, volunteers, and staff. We could not continually pivot, recreate, and grow without the support of each one of you. I humbly thank you for your support in 2022 and beyond.

SMRLS CEO RECOGNIZED FOR 15 YEARS OF SERVICE IN ROLE

In September of 2022, SMRLS CEO Jessie Nicholson attended LSC's Executive Director Conference in Washington, DC. At their awards dinner, Jessie was recognized for her 15 years of service as SMRLS' CEO. We are grateful to have a leader who is so dedicated to SMRLS and the clients we serve.





INTRODUCTION

Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services provides free, high-quality legal help to low-income people in critical civil matters. For 113 years, we've helped individuals and families secure and protect their basic needs, maintaining freedom from hunger, homelessness, sickness, and abuse. Because, justice matters.

MISSION STATEMENT

To provide a full range of high quality legal services to low-income persons and eligible client groups in civil matters, in a respectful manner which enables clients to (1) enforce their legal rights; (2) obtain effective access to the courts, administrative agencies and forums which constitute our system of justice; (3) maintain freedom from hunger, homelessness, sickness and abuse; (4) empower persons and assure equal opportunity, thus, helping people to help themselves and become economically self-reliant, to the extent their individual abilities and circumstances permit.

SMRLS, through a diverse, respectful and fair working environment, and legal assistance and community education activities, promotes and respects the dignity of low-income persons and seeks new and effective solutions to the critical and common legal problems of low-income persons which arise in a broad community context.



2022 EVENTS RECAP

The 16th annual **Social Justice: Uncorked** was held on Thursday, August 4th at The Depot in downtown Minneapolis. Guests enjoyed wine tasting, live music, silent and live auctions, and connecting with friends and supporters of SMRLS. This event was a record breaking success! We raised a total of \$214,765! Pictured here is Steve Yoch, who has been volunteering with SMRLS since 1989. He shared a few of the cases he's worked on over the years that have had a lasting impact on him.

We held our annual **Fall Appreciation Luncheon** on Tuesday, November 22nd at the InterContinental in downtown Saint Paul. Our keynote speaker for the event was Emily Baxter, executive director of the nonprofit We Are All Criminals. She gave an enlightening address regarding the consequences of incarceration and a criminal record in the United States



The 19th Annual **Lawyers on Ice** hockey fundraiser was held on Monday, January 31st at the Xcel Energy Center. 60 attorneys and professionals from the Twin Cities came together to play a friendly hockey tournament once again to raise money for SMRLS. Together, we raised over \$10,000 for legal aid in Minnesota.

A special thank you to CLA member, Mike O'Neill (Martin & Squires) for organizing this event year after year!



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We asked our staff in each unit to share trends, challenges, and successes they experienced in 2022.

Immigration

In 2022, we saw an increase in our naturalization clients' medical waivers getting denied for various reasons, some for very technical reasons but some for very subjective reasons. This impacted our disabled non-English clients who were receiving SSI and/or were at risk of getting cutoff from SSI. It also took more resources for an attorney to file a motion to appeal the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) decision to deny a client's naturalization application because of the officer's incorrect medical waiver rejections. The pandemic exacerbated this, because some of our disabled clients were high-risk, so having to leave their homes to see their psychologists for unnecessary additional evaluations puts them at greater risk of getting sick.

Healthcare-Legal Partnership

We created a partnership with Catholic Charities to assist a client in receiving some rental assistance. Anyone who lives in southern Minnesota and has a child under 12 months is eligible to receive one-time financial assistance through this program. Our staff also created a partnership with Phalen Village and our attorneys conducted a training there for staff and providers about how HLP works.

Agricultural Worker Project

The AWP has been collaborating with community partners to address labor trafficking. Our relationship with the North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force (NDHTTF) has been strengthening for the past couple of years. A joint outreach trip to Western North Dakota occurred in June. A joint outreach trip occurred in Eastern North Dakota in September 2022, too. The AWP has also worked with the Southwest Crisis Center (SWCC) - based in Worthington, MN - to provide legal information to communities through targeted outreach to areas with suspected labor trafficking issues. Overall, the AWP had another impactful year of outreach and case work. Sixty-three cases were opened. 599 agricultural workers were informed about their legal rights through visits to worker housing, our regular presence at a healthcare legal partnership clinic, and participation at other community events. Additionally, 518 community partners and community members learned about the AWP's services and legal rights of and issues facing agricultural workers.

Economic Justice

In 2022, we had a good year in US District Court. We won two cases in federal court. We won \$10,000 in attorneys' (Equal Access to Justice Act, or EAJA) fees on one case and has the 2nd fee petition pending. One of our attorney's won their first Social Security appeal to district court and won \$12,000 in attorneys' fees. Another attorney filed a motion for order to show cause (contempt) on a case previously remanded by federal court (for which we also got attorneys' fees); after the ALJ relented and issued a fully favorable decision, the attorney withdrew the motion.

Education Law Advocacy Project

Distance learning during the pandemic lockdowns had long-lasting effects on children's learning. Many students are still struggling to recover learning lost and to catch up to their grade level, as evidenced by the historic drop in the 2022 reading and math standardized test scores. ELAP's outreach efforts last year were very well received by local organizations and agencies who work with youth and families. ELAP partnered with approximately 40 organizations throughout SMRLS service area to do presentations for their staff, for youth and parent groups on education rights and advocacy topics, and to share brochures through tabling. ELAP also started a newsletter, and established a solid social media presence, with weekly informative posts on Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

Housing

RentHelpMN is no longer accepting applications. As a result, there is a decrease in availability of financial assistance for low-income tenants who are behind on rent and need financial help to prevent eviction. The combination of the decrease in funds and the lifting of the moratorium on evictions means that many low-income individuals and families are losing their homes. Beginning in November of 2022, Ramsey County set about 50 to 100 eviction first appearances for two Fridays each month. These appearances are referred to as eviction clearance events. Clinic services are not available on these Fridays. SMRLS, however, advocated with judicial branch staff to allow automatic continuances for tenants who wish to meet with legal or financial services. We were able to craft the script that was read to tenants at these events and allow for continuances. While the backlog needs to be addressed, we are fearful that clearance events will negatively impact tenants. Our office is beginning to see more requests for help re-opening cases because of missed court appearances. We meet with the court monthly to report on problems and try to find solutions.

Family

Family law cases are challenging. The client usually comes to SMRLS during one of the most stressful period of their lives. Many people consider their children and their safety to be the most important things in their lives, and this often leaves clients in mentally, emotionally and financially challenging situations where they are not at their best and are trying to make decisions that will greatly impact their future. Custody matters often require victims to interact and co-parent with abusive former partners and try to make decisions with that individual. Custody matters can limit a person's time with their child, where the person can/cannot live and with whom, and whether they can relocate. Trends continue to move parents towards forced co-parenting even when those situations are harming a child. There is a dire lack of qualified professionals available to assist children and families, and other professionals who assist them, in these areas of communication, co-parenting and minimizing conflict. SMRLS' family law staff strive to provide high quality legal representation to all clients through the framework of simultaneously protecting children and families from harmful practices and procedures.

Racial Justice Committee

SMRLS Racial Justice team, active since 2008, focuses on ensuring we are identifying and addressing racism in community lawyering, starting at home. While equity, diversity, and inclusion practices and policies are commonplace in professional settings now, SMRLS has been working for over 15 years to ensure that racial equity is information all our decision making, policies, and procedures, as well as our strategic partnerships.

The team is made up of staff from across the organization who are leading the way by participating in racial equity training, collaborations with other legal aid providers across the state and examining what racial justice looks like in our everyday work. An emphasis is placed on proactively creating a welcoming and secure environment for both our clients and staff of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities to thrive and seek justice.

The team is participating in yearlong training with the Shriver Center for Poverty Law to learn best practices for racial equity in community lawyering. Over 50% of the people served by SMRLS on an annual basis are people of color, black, indigenous, and/or immigrants living at the intersection of race and poverty. We must not only be sensitive to this dynamic but actively working to build trust with the communities we serve.

We look forward to sharing more with you about the work of the Racial Justice Team as they wrap up their training in 2023 and begin a firm-wide engagement and training plan.

VAP by the numbers

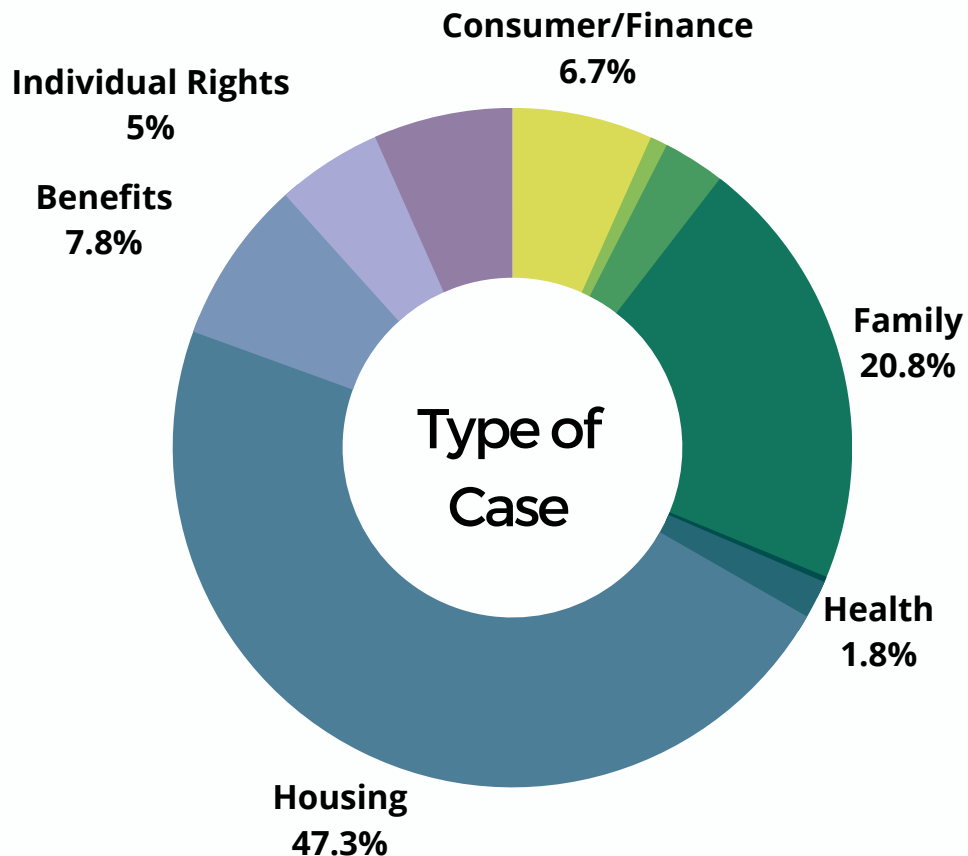
The SMRLS volunteer attorney program (VAP) utilizes volunteers to take additional cases in areas staff attorneys practice in (housing, family) and finds volunteers to take cases that staff attorneys do not have expertise in (Probate, Guardianship, Real Estate). The program also interacts with law students, undergraduate, corporate, and paralegal volunteers. VAP holds clinics for pro se and unbundled service, administers service and filing on complicated pro se cases such as criminal expungement, and supports volunteers who work on full representation cases.

- **99 volunteer attorneys & more** than **1500 hours** assisting clients
- **Over 30 criminal records expunged**, the majority in rural counties
- In-person clinics in all 3 service regions
- **Case numbers doubled**
- **2 metro area walk-in clinics & 2 housing clinics**
- **VAP partnered with:**
 - RCBA Young Lawyers section, Allianz, Minnesota Justice Foundation, Mitchell Hamline, Erase the Stigma, and Winona State University

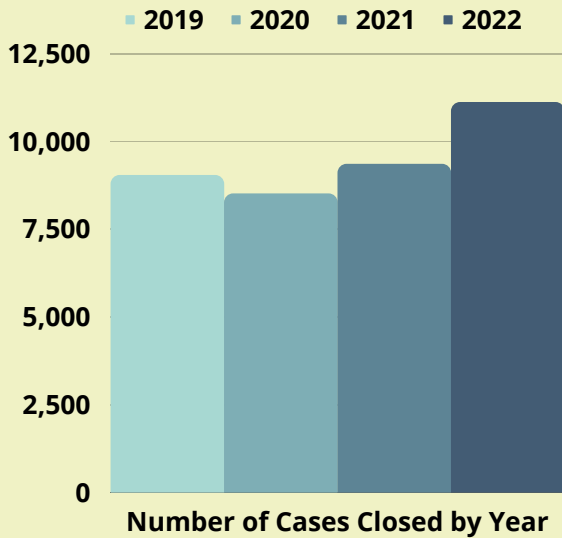
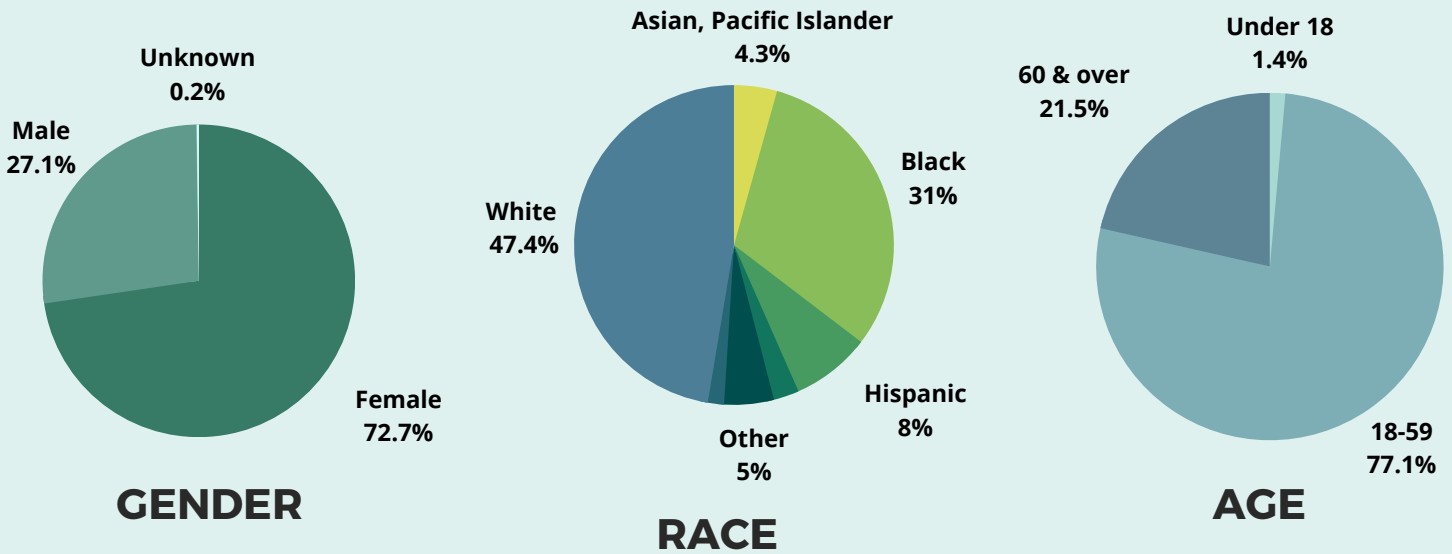
A YEAR IN REVIEW

25,043 people in households served

11,325 cases opened

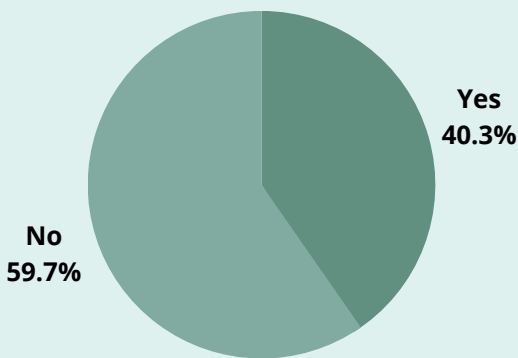


CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS



Increasing Need

After a drop in closed cases in 2020 due to the pandemic, cases closed increased significantly in 2021 and even more significantly in 2022. **Closed cases increased by 16.5% from 2021 to 2022.** This demonstrates the increasing need in our communities for legal aid AND the dedication and commitment of our staff.



Clients served spoke **over 30** languages.

English - 9484	Burmese - 6
Spanish - 228	Cambodian - 8
Karen - 118	French - 2
Somali - 140	Chinese - 3
Hmong - 55	Albanian - 5
Oromo - 8	Other African languages - 16
Amharic - 10	Other Asian languages - 16
Arabic - 22	Other - 33
Vietnamese - 11	Unknown - 947
American Sign Language - 3	

Did the client represented have a **physical or mental disability?**

Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, Inc.

Statements of Financial Position

December 31, 2022 and 2021

	<u>2022</u>	<u>2021</u>
Assets		
Current Assets		
Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 3,349,462	\$ 3,217,103
Certificates of deposit	2,100,000	2,100,000
Client escrow funds	6,626	14,037
Grants and contracts receivable	984,551	1,553,772
Prepaid expenses	70,496	67,151
Investments	16,116	15,328
	<u>6,527,251</u>	<u>6,967,391</u>
Property and Equipment, net		
Furniture and fixtures	256,820	256,820
Leasehold improvements	223,695	223,695
Law library	382,385	382,385
Computer equipment	168,514	51,652
Vehicle	90,832	90,832
	<u>1,122,246</u>	<u>1,005,384</u>
Less accumulated depreciation	<u>(951,206)</u>	<u>(902,188)</u>
Net property and equipment	<u>171,040</u>	<u>103,196</u>
Other Assets		
Right-of-use asset	<u>1,503,605</u>	<u>-</u>
Total assets	<u>\$ 8,201,896</u>	<u>\$ 7,070,587</u>
Liabilities and Net Assets		
Current Liabilities		
Accounts payable	\$ 318,318	\$ 183,614
Client trust deposits	-	7,250
Accrued expenses	1,368,478	1,134,050
Deferred rent	-	49,977
Lease liability	600,141	-
Deferred revenue	778,136	769,608
	<u>3,065,073</u>	<u>2,144,499</u>
Long-term Liabilities		
Lease liability	<u>961,613</u>	<u>-</u>
Total long-term liabilities	<u>961,613</u>	<u>-</u>
Net Assets		
Without donor restrictions	662,211	504,602
Without donor restrictions, board designated	3,483,867	3,483,867
Total without donor restrictions	4,146,078	3,988,469
With donor restrictions	<u>29,132</u>	<u>937,619</u>
Total net assets	<u>4,175,210</u>	<u>4,926,088</u>
Total liabilities and net assets	<u>\$ 8,201,896</u>	<u>\$ 7,070,587</u>

Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, Inc.

Statement of Functional Expenses

Year Ended December 31, 2022 (With Comparative Totals for 2021)

	Program Services	Supporting Services		Total 2022	Total 2021
		Management and General	Fundraising		
Expenses					
Personnel					
Donated services	\$ 508,047	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 508,047	\$ 420,331
Lawyers	4,304,824	-	3,275	4,308,199	4,353,166
Paralegals	887,217	-	-	887,217	731,809
Other staff	1,018,145	788,188	168,193	1,974,524	1,758,413
Employee benefits and taxes	2,546,971	309,130	69,908	2,926,009	2,587,653
Total personnel	9,263,304	1,097,318	241,376	10,601,996	9,851,372
Non Personnel					
Contract labor	131,392	155,200	-	286,592	79,405
Rent and space	628,732	62,428	-	691,158	708,920
Travel and mileage	41,781	25,908	1,849	69,516	29,352
Training, dues and subscriptions	38,182	62,382	2,241	100,805	72,321
Phone, office and postage	67,071	181,787	979	249,837	263,154
Equipment, copier and software	146,401	27,143	2,331	175,875	194,889
Events	-	-	79,920	79,920	70,061
Litigation, interpreter and legal research	179,559	-	-	179,559	150,233
Administrative fees and expenses	130,129	156,218	352	286,699	212,137
Depreciation	-	49,018	-	49,018	17,156
Miscellaneous	108,241	-	-	108,241	13,785
Contracts	20,000	-	-	20,000	61,497
Coalition support	257,208	-	-	257,208	253,480
County and other support	50,495	-	-	50,495	55,364
Total non personnel	1,797,171	720,080	87,672	2,604,923	2,179,734
Total expenses	\$ 11,060,475	\$ 1,817,398	\$ 329,048	\$ 13,206,919	\$ 12,031,106
Percentage of total expenses	83.7%	13.8%	2.5%	100.0%	

Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, Inc.

Statement of Activities

Year Ended December 31, 2022 (With Comparative Totals for 2021)

	2022			2021
	Without Donor Restrictions	With Donor Restrictions	Total	Total
Support and Revenue				
Grants and contracts	\$ 9,773,371	\$ 1,540,050	\$ 11,313,421	\$ 9,308,752
Other support	480,494	-	480,494	982,010
In-kind contributions	619,909	-	619,909	407,492
Miscellaneous	26,711	-	26,711	5,195
Investment income	15,506	-	15,506	10,970
Net assets released from restrictions	2,448,537	(2,448,537)	-	-
Total support and revenue	13,364,528	(908,487)	12,456,041	10,714,419
Expenses				
Program services	11,060,475	-	11,060,475	10,238,007
Supporting services:				
Management and general	1,817,396	-	1,817,396	1,464,181
Fundraising	329,048	-	329,048	328,918
Total expenses	13,206,919	-	13,206,919	12,031,106
Change in net assets	157,609	(908,487)	(750,878)	(1,316,687)
Net Assets, Beginning	3,988,469	937,619	4,926,088	6,242,775
Net Assets, Ending	\$ 4,146,078	\$ 29,132	\$ 4,175,210	\$ 4,926,088



2022 Funding Partners

Ain Dah-Yung Center
Blue Cross Blue Shield of MN Foundation
Children's Healthcare Legal Partnership
City of St. Paul
Equal Justice Works
Family Housing Fund
Greater Mankato Area United Way
Greater Twin Cities United Way
Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association

Legal Services Corporation
Medica Foundation
MN Dept. of Human Services
MN Dept. of Public Safety
Minnesota Justice Foundation
Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging
Otto Bremer Trust
Proof Alliance
Ramsey County Housing and Redev. Authority

Southeastern Minnesota Area Agency on Aging
State of MN Legal Services Advisory Committee
Trellis Area Agency on Aging
U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Dev.
United Way of Mower County
United Way of Steele County
United Way of Washington County East

Funder Spotlight - 3M

For more than 40 years, 3M has been committed to supporting SMRLS' mission to provide legal services to our most vulnerable Minnesotans. This support has come in many forms. Most notably in the early 1980's when 3M General Counsel were instrumental in lobbying alongside the Minnesota State Bar Association to secure the first budget appropriation from the State Legislature (1982) for legal services, making Minnesota one of the first states to ensure access to civil legal aid in the country.

Over the years we have benefitted from the presence of 3M legal staff on our Board of Directors, including current board member Brett Strand, Esq., Vice President, and Associate General Counsel. 3M's gifts of advocacy and guidance are matched only by their financial commitment, which now exceeds 1.2 million dollars and counting. In countless ways 3M has directly impacted the lives of people who rely on free legal services to address and resolve issues relating to housing, benefits, education, health, and family. We are made better by their support, and we are so very grateful.

Thank you to our Gold Sponsors of Social Justice: Uncorked and the Fall Appreciation Luncheon

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A special thank you to Steve Kirsch (left) who, after serving as chair of the CLA for over a decade, stepped down as Chair in 2022.

Campaign for Legal Aid Supporters

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Trina Vu
United States District Court
Veena Iyer

Unfortunately, we don't have room to list everyone who supported our mission in 2022, but we are grateful for every gift. Thank you.

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