# 2021 Annual Report















#### 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.

## **How to Help**

#### **Direct Donation**

Your donation - of any amount - will be counted to our Annual Campaign. These funds will be used to support direct client services, providing critical legal assistance to those who otherwise would not be able to afford it. Visit smrls.org/donate to learn more.

#### Volunteer

In Minnesota, there are over 2900 eligible clients for every paid legal aid attorney. If you are an attorney looking to make a difference, please consider donating your time and expertise to SMRLS and our client community. Visit smrls.org/volunteer to learn more.

#### **Planned Giving**

To ensure that SMRLS can continue to serve our community in the coming decades, please consider making a planned gift, either as part of your estate or to commemorate a cornerstone event; a birth, a graduation, a retirement, or other joyous occasion. Reach out to cla@smrls.org to get more information.

## **SMRLS PROGRAMS**

SMRLS provides a full range of legal services, including extended representation, limited representation, brief services and advice. Access to those services is provided throughout the service area via local offices, local clinics, and staff embedded in partner's offices across the service area. SMRLS's Agricultural Worker Program provides a full range of services to eligible farm workers across the entire states of Minnesota and North Dakota.

We use a number of methods to deliver services to eligible clients across its service area, including specialized law units that focus on individual cases and impact litigation, hotline attorneys who ffer clients advice, and occassional brief service, and pro bono attorneys who offer assistance at pro se divorce clinics, wills clinics, and housing clinics. In addition, SMRLS imbeds staff attorneys at healthcare clinics across the service area to extend our reach to clients who otherwise may not be aware of its services.

Our **Housing** unit protects clients from a loss of affordable housing. Priority cases include:

- Issues with landlords including serious repair problems, illegal changing of locks, and illegal retaliation against a tenant for enforcing their rights.
- Eviction issues, including evictions from manufactured homes, evictions where children reside in the household, families receiving rental assistance subsidies, and special needs tenants.
- Loss of rental assistance subsidies.
- Illegal housing discrimination.

Our **Family Law** attorneys preserve stability for children, protects victims of abuse, and secures financial stability for families. Priority cases include:

- Cases involving victims of domestic abuse, sexual assault, dating violence, or stalking, including Orders for Protection, and Harassment Restraining Orders.
- Assistance for primary caretakers including responding to divorce or custody
  petitions where the non-caretaker is seeking custody, and custody
  modification and restricted parenting time when the child is in danger.
- Situations involving a friend of family member seeking custody when the child will otherwise be placed in foster care.
- Indian Child Welfare Act cases.

Our **Economic Justice** program maximizes financial outcomes for clients to meet their basic needs. Priority cases include:

- Emergency assistance with utility shut off, unpaid rent, and eviction.
- Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and Diversionary Work Program (DWP).
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) denial or termination.
- Unemployment Insurance.
- Garnishments from paychecks or bank accounts.



Our Healthcare-Legal Partnerships prioritize cases that address the social determinants of health for low-income patients are several clinic locations in Minnesota. SMRLS currently has partnerships with the following clinics:

- Bethesda Clinic, St. Paul
- Children's Hospital and Clinics, St. Paul
- Open Door Health Center, Mankato
- Proof Alliance, St. Paul
- Wilder Community Mental Health and Wellness Clinic, St. Paul





Agricultural Workers Project helps with employment-related legal issues to improve the working and living conditions for agricultural workers in Minnesota and North Dakota. Priority cases include:

- · Wage theft.
- Workplace health and safety violations.
- Employer-provided housing concerns.
- Employment discrimination and retaliation.
- H-2A contract violations.
- Labor trafficking.

Our Legal Advocacy for Older People project represents people 60 years or older with a focus on those with the greatest social and economic need. Priority cases include:

- Benefits including Food Stamps (SNAP), Medical Assistance (MA), and Social Security Disability.
- Evictions, subsidized housing, and reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities.
- Elder Abuse.
- Nursing Home payment, conditions, and discharge.





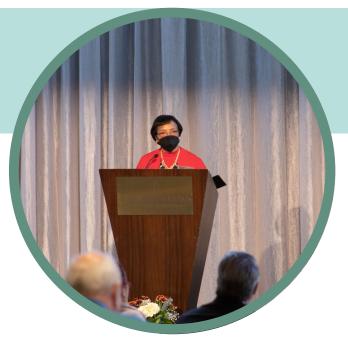
Our **Education Law** project enforces children's rights to receive a fair and appropriate education from early childhood through high school. Priority cases include:

- School expulsions and suspensions.
- Special education services for students with disabilities.
- Education of English language learners.
- Racial discrimination and bias in schools.
- Bullying and harassment in schools.

Our Immigration unit reunites clients with their families and helps them become increasingly self-sufficient. Priority cases include:

- Applications for permanent residence.
- Naturalization and citizenship applications.
- Applications for victims of domestic violence and violent crimes.
- Replacement of lost, stolen, or expiring documents.





## A Note from CEO Jessie Nicholson:

We have been living with the pandemic and its effects for over two years now. In our last annual report, I told you about how legal services were impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic. Year two of the pandemic brought an additional increase in need for legal services. Last year, we served over 22,500 Minnesotans with quality legal advice and advocacy. We closed 842 more cases in 2021 than in 2020. Both the number of clients, and the complexity of their legal problems, continue to increase. This is our new normal.

Our team at SMRLS have added new staff members. The Education Law Advocacy Project (ELAP) at SMRLS' Midway office learned early in the pandemic that kids from poor families, families of color, and English language learners were going to be at particular risk of falling behind during remote learning. ELAP responded and grew their team to include a social media specialist to enhance outreach and communication efforts. As the eviction "moratorium" ended, SMRLS' housing staff were confronted with rising numbers of evictions. Our Housing Unit added another housing clinic to triage evictions.

We find ourselves, like many others, finding creative new ways to do the same core work of our mission - protecting families from hunger, homelessness, sickness, and abuse. For example, we rely on virtual court rooms in each of our offices so that we can go to court "in person", with our clients, in the same room. Our teams have pivoted to offer virtual presentations for many community legal education programs. We found ourselves needing to reenvision how legal aid clinics can operate. Our **Justice Bus** hit the road to reach clients in isolated communities. The Agricultural Workers' Project, which relies on getting out to communities to meet agricultural workers where they live and work, worked with public health crews to reach prospective clients at vaccination clinics so they could meet clients where they live and work.

Our dedicated staff and volunteers continue to do more than ever before for those folks most at risk. Legal aid continues to be 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 benefits accessible to those who need them.

Here at SMRLS, 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 and every one of you. I humbly thank you for your support in 2021 and beyond.

Thoughtfully and Thankfully,

Ssi L. nicholson

## 2021 Events

## **Fall Appreciation Luncheon**

We held our annual Fall Appreciation Luncheon on November 23rd, 2021 at the InterContinental Riverfront Hotel in downtown St. Paul. The event was a great success! We welcomed 170 in-person attendees, as well as 42 virtual attendees. Our keynote speaker for the event was The Honorable Richard Gergel; he delivered an educating address discussing the intersection of race and the justice system.





## **Social Justice Uncorked**

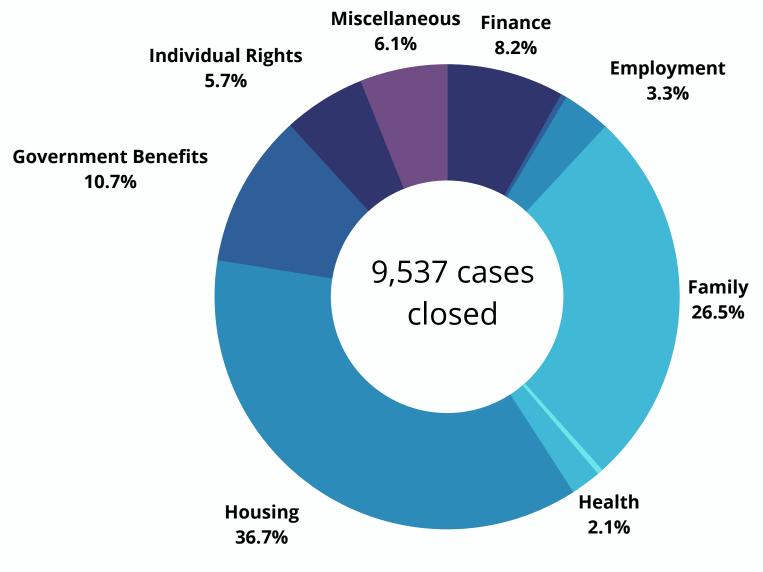
The 14th Social Justice Uncorked took place on December 16th, 2021 at The Depot in downtown Minneapolis. The hybrid event format allowed for 120 in-person attendees, and 43 virtual attendees. We were grateful to have had Don Lewis as the guest host at this year's gala. The total raised at this event was \$164,604.24!





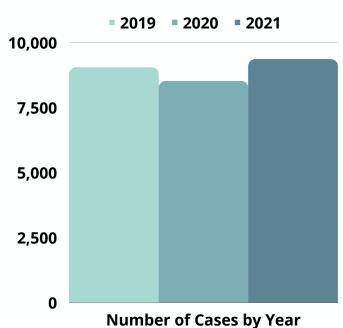
## A Year in Review

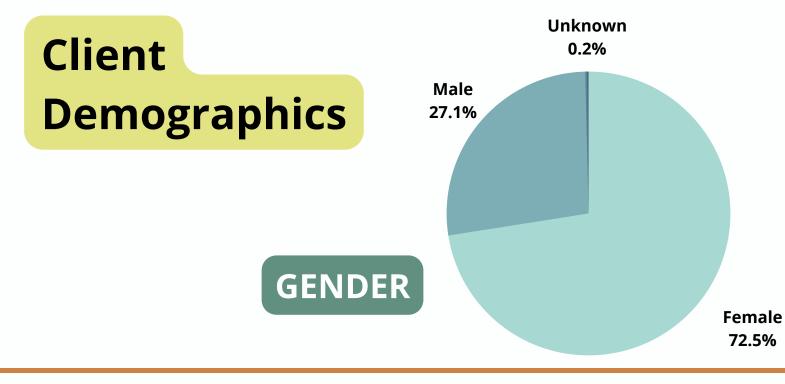
## 24,423 people in households served

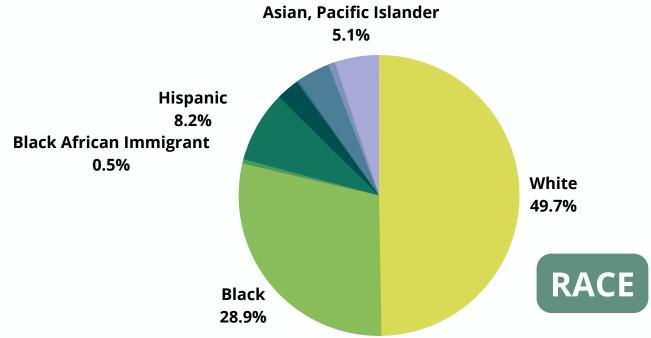


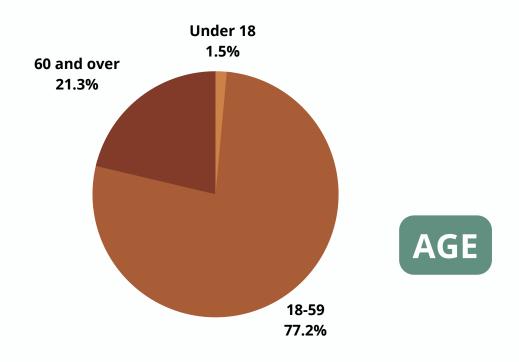
## Increasing need...

In 2020, we saw a significant drop in the number of cases closed; this was due to the unprecedented global pandemic and learning to navigate legal aid virtually. Even though we remain in a pandemic, SMRLS has found creative ways to effectively deliver services. As a result, we closed more cases in 2021 than 2020 and 2019.



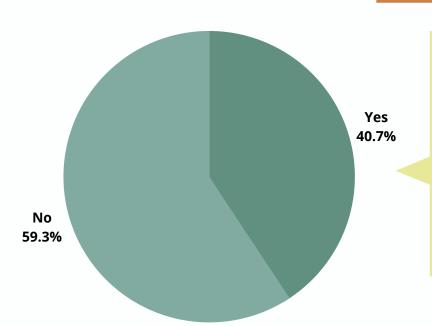




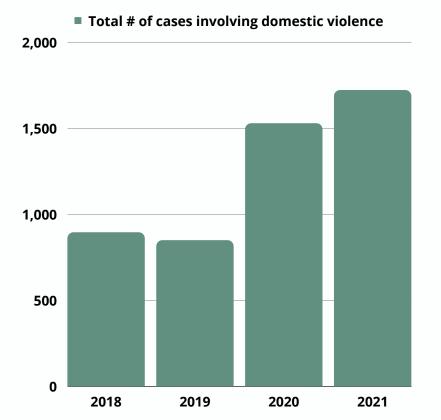


Clients served spoke **over 20** languages.

English - 8327 Burmese - 9 Cambodian - 9 Spanish - 223 French - 3 Karen - 145 Russian - 1 Somali - 140 Albanian - 1 Hmong - 62 Oromo - 18 Other African Amharic - 13 languages - 8 Arabic - 13 Other Asian Vietnamese - 11 languages - 7 Other - 22 American Sign Unknown - 330 Language - 10



Did the client represented have a physical or mental disability?



## A note about the increase in domestic violence...

A number of studies have found that intimate partner violence has significantly increased during the COVID19 pandemic.

We have seen this disturbing increase within our client community as well; from 2019 to 2020, the total number of cases involving domestic violence increased by **80%**. From 2020 to 2021, it increased by an additional **12%**; the number of cases involving domestic violence **doubled** in just two years, from 2019 to 2021.

## Volunteer Attorney Program

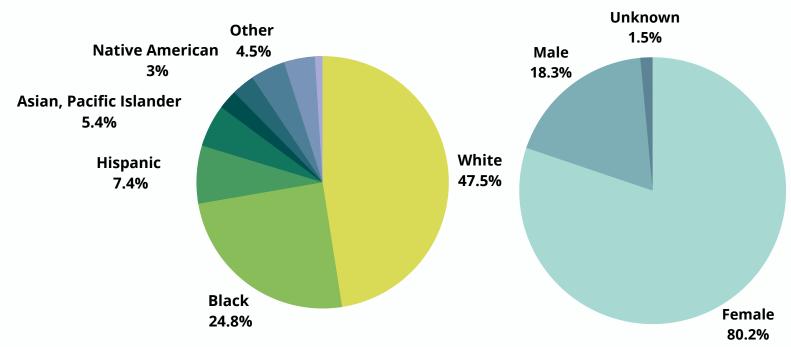
Number of cases closed by volunteer attorneys: 39 Largest number of hours by a volunteer on a single case: 90

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. There is never a boring day in VAP; we see unique cases that don't "fit" in a problem code. For instance, in 2021, we help a client obtain a pro se name change that required a felon name change notice using the same support format we use for divorce clinics. The case recently successfully closed.



In October, the SMRLS Volunteer Attorney program held their first inperson clinic since February of 2019 in partnership with Allianz Life Insurance and the MN Elder Justice Center. At the clinic they were able to draft 13 estate planning documents for clients in a small, COVID-safe clinic.

## VAP Client Demographics



#### WHAT'S NEW WITH VAP?

Several clinics were re-established in 2021: Eviction Expungement, Criminal Expungement, and Estate Planning.

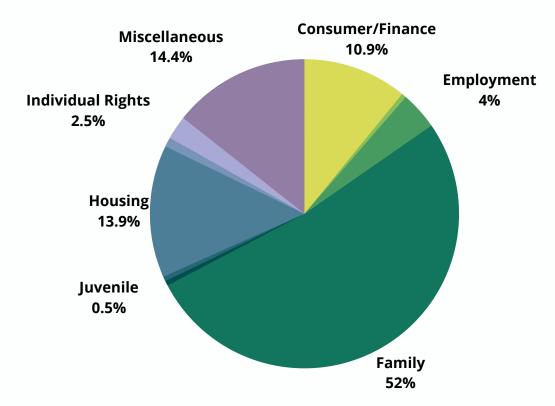
We were also able to start a new clinic in partnership with Mitchell Hamline and Interfaith Action. Beautiful Laundrette is a walk-in clinic held at a laundromat in West St. Paul.

## WHAT DO VOLUNTEER ATTORNEYS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH VAP?

"I want to sincerely thank [client] and SMRLS for the opportunity to work with and represent [client]. She is a delightful woman and I am proud to have represented her in her divorce proceeding through SMRLS."

"As I have mentioned before, the assistance the SMRLS provides, especially the assistance from Emily (Volunteer Coordinator), was exemplary in all respects."

## Categories of VAP Cases



#### Interested in becoming a volunteer attorney with SMRLS?

Apply online at smrls.org/volunteer or contact one of our volunteer coordinators:

SW Minnesota/Greater Mankato:'
Forrest McKnight
forrest.mcnknight@smrls.org

**OR** 

SE Minnesota/Twin Cities Metro:
Emily Bowen
emily.bowen@smrls.org

# Statement of Financial Position December 31, 2021 and 2020

Assets  Current Assets  Cash and cash equivalents	3,217,103 2,100,000	\$ 4,280,706			
Current Assets	2,100,000	\$ 4 280 706			
	2,100,000	\$ 4.280.706			
Cash and cash equivalents \$	2,100,000	\$ 4.280.706			
Certificates of deposit Client escrow funds		2,100,000			
Grants and contracts receivable	14,037 1,553,772	1,302 918,962			
Prepaid expenses	67,151	53,534			
Other receivable	-	23,269			
Investments	15,328	14,515			
Total current assets	6,967,391	7,392,288			
Property and Equipment, net					
Furniture, fixtures and equipment	308,472	308,472			
Leasehold improvements	223,695	223,695			
Vehicle Law library	90,832 382,385	90,832 382,385			
	1,005,384	1,005,384			
Less accumulated depreciation	(902,188)	(885,032)			
Net property and equipment	103,196	120,352			
Total assets \$	7,070,587	\$ 7,512,640			
Liabilities and Net Assets					
Current Liabilities					
Accounts payable \$	183,614	\$ 272,145			
Client trust deposits	7,250	1,302			
Accrued expenses Deferred rent	1,134,050 49,977	959,589 36,829			
Deferred revenue	769,608	-			
		4 000 005			
Total current liabilities	2,144,499	1,269,865			
Net Assets					
Without donor restrictions	504,602	2,081,687			
Without donor restrictions, board designated	3,483,867	3,483,867			
Total without donor restrictions	3,988,469	5,565,554			
With donor restrictions	937,619	677,221			
Total net assets	4,926,088	6,242,775			
Total liabilities and net assets	7,070,587	\$ 7,512,640			

## **Statement of Activities** Year Ended December 31, 2021

		2020		
	Without Donor Restrictions	With Donor Restrictions	Total	Total
Support and Revenue Grants and contracts Other support In-kind contributions Miscellaneous Investment income Net assets released from restrictions	\$ 6,596,590 533,398 407,492 5,195 10,970 2,900,376	\$ 2,712,162 448,612 - - (2,900,376)	\$ 9,308,752 982,010 407,492 5,195 10,970	\$ 8,763,185 1,589,993 646,819 37,448 15,354
Total support and revenue	10,454,021	260,398	10,714,419	11,052,799
Expenses Program services Supporting services: Management and general Fundraising	10,238,007 1,464,181 328,918		10,238,007 1,464,181 328,918	10,172,606 1,673,724 311,524
Total expenses	12,031,106		12,031,106	12,157,854
Change in net assets	(1,577,085)	260,398	(1,316,687)	(1,105,055)
Net Assets, Beginning	5,565,554	677,221	6,242,775	7,347,830
Net Assets, Ending	\$ 3,988,469	\$ 937,619	\$ 4,926,088	\$ 6,242,775

# Statement of Functional Expenses Year Ended December 31, 2021

	Program	Supporting Services  Management		Total	Total	
	Services	and General	Fundraising	2021	2020	
Expenses						
Personnel						
Donated services	\$ 420,331	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 420,331	\$ 646,976	
Lawyers	4,235,027		118,139	4,353,166	4,268,242	
Paralegals	717,452		14,357	731,809	716,057	
Other staff	954,424	803,989	-	1,758,413	1,647,998	
Employee benefits and taxes	2,274,514	199,515	113,624	2,587,653	2,386,708	
Total personnel	8,601,748	1,003,504	246,120	9,851,372	9,665,981	
Non Personnel						
Contract labor	26,427	52.978		79,405	299,117	
Rent and space	651,997	54,923		706,920	674,913	
Travel and mileage	19.591	9,403	358	29.352	33,259	
Training, dues and subscriptions	42.775	23.881	5.665	72.321	103,833	
Phone, office and postage	127,541	133,743	1.870	263,154	273,297	
Equipment, copier and software	160,134	29,891	4.844	194,869	178,618	
Events	100,104	25,051	70,061	70.061	19.043	
Litigation, interpreter and legal research	150.233		70,001	150,233	124.540	
Administrative fees and expenses	73,435	138,702		212,137	148,970	
Depreciation	70,400	17,156		17.156	3.697	
Miscellaneous	13,785	17,130	-	13,785	180.498	
Contracts	61,497	-	-	61,497	116,892	
Coalition support	253,480			253,480	269,406	
County and other support	55,364		-	55,364	65,790	
County and other support	30,364			33,364	65,790	
Total non personnel	1,636,259	460,677	82,798	2,179,734	2,491,873	
Total expenses	\$ 10,238,007	\$ 1,464,181	\$ 328,918	\$ 12,031,106	\$ 12,157,854	
Percentage of total expenses	85.1%	12.2%	2.7%	100.0%		

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