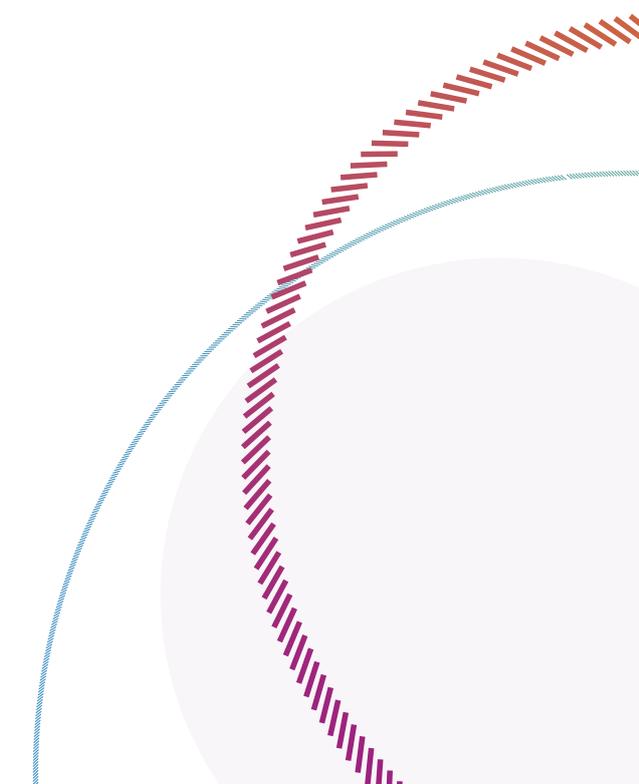


LEGAL AID  
JUSTICE CENTER

# STRATEGIC PLAN

2022 - 2026



Dear fellow lover of justice,

When Jean Cahn, a Black woman lawyer from Baltimore, set out to create a nationwide legal services program in 1964, she wanted to erect institutions to support low-income people and communities of color in wielding their own power against the systems that create and perpetuate poverty. She had a vision that legal services organizations would become “corporate lawyers” for individuals and community groups. For that, she was labeled a troublemaker and, eventually, pushed to the margins of her own dream.

For decades, the Legal Aid Justice Center has strived to carry out Jean Cahn’s original vision, one that pairs tenacious advocacy for individuals with bold advocacy for systemic reform. In this strategic plan, we asked our clients and community partners, “What does it look like to embrace the radical roots of legal services in the 21st century?”

Their answers were clear:

**We must further center our work in deep partnership with communities directly harmed by systemic racism.** In late 2019, the Legal Aid Justice Center’s Board of Directors approved a strategic plan that explicitly named racial justice as core to the organization’s anti-poverty mission. In this plan, we commit to meeting a community’s urgent needs for survival by providing them with individualized legal help, while also helping them build their collective power so that they can shape their own futures.

**We should expand our presence to work for justice for people across Virginia.** Our policy advocacy, communications, organizing, and impact litigation already has statewide impacts. It is important that we be accountable to people in communities across the state by expanding our geographic presence and building stronger relationships with impacted people and community partners in areas where we do not currently have staff.

**We must share power and resources.** To fulfill our mission, we need to draw on the knowledge, skills, time, and labor of other people and organizations, including people from systematically under-resourced communities. We must look for ways to pay them for their labor and expertise, share our knowledge, access, and resources with them, and invite them into decisionmaking.

**We must apply our values to our own internal systems and culture.** We cannot achieve the change we wish to see in the world unless we ourselves adopt deliberate anti-racism policies and practices. It is critical that we embed LAJC’s commitment to racial justice throughout the organization by supporting the well-being of our staff and by applying an anti-racist analysis to programs, strategic planning, and internal policies and systems.

To make all of this happen, our plan calls on us to take the following steps:

- Design and implement organization-wide standards for centering community voices in our advocacy
- Building from our farmworker project, create a new program centering workers and workplace justice.

- Expand our physical operations by rebuilding our presence in Petersburg and establishing a new presence in Hampton Roads
- Improve our capacity to provide legal, organizing, fundraising, communications, and other kinds of support to help community groups achieve their goals
- Audit and improve our internal systems to ensure that they uphold our commitment to equity, transparency, and power sharing across the organization
- Provide competitive salaries and benefits, offer permanent flexible work, increase operational and administrative support, and maintain a culture of radical love and acceptance and support of each other

Thank you to The Spark Mill for bravely leading a bunch of intrepid lawyers and community activists through this planning process. Thank you to the community partners who cared about us enough to offer their wisdom and insights. And thank you to all the troublemakers who dare to work at and with LAJC to hold the legal system and other powerful structures accountable to the people.

Here's to our radical roots,



**Angela Ciolfi**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*\*When we refer to "community" or "communities," we mean groups of people linked by common interests and experiences that reflect the impact of economic inequity, racist policies, and current and historical disinvestment in them as individuals, families, neighborhoods, and more broadly impacted groups. Communities can be united by identity (e.g., immigrants), experience (e.g., poverty), geography (e.g., Richmond), relationship to an unjust policy (e.g., criminal record), and more. We prioritize partnership and service to individuals directly impacted by systemic injustice and groups predominantly composed of and/or led by those individuals, and we also listen to and work alongside individuals and groups who are not themselves directly affected but who are primarily engaged in activities for the benefit of directly affected people. Because we live in a racially structured society that causes racial inequity across systems, we cannot effectively address poverty without listening to communities of color and those organizing to dismantle the systems that create and perpetuate poverty.*

## OUR PROCESS:

This strategic plan was put together with the help of The Spark Mill over sixteen months between March 2021 and June 2022. The construction of the plan happened in three phases: Gather, Soak, and Radiate.

Gather: March 2021 – September 2021:

We knew from the start that we needed both the process and the plan to reflect and advance LAJC's commitment to community-centered advocacy. In this first phase, The Spark Mill solicited from us a list of community organizations and individuals with whom we partner. The Spark Mill then conducted one-on-one and small group interviews with over 120 external stakeholders and over 60 internal stakeholders asking both prescribed and open-ended questions about LAJC's current work and their hopes for LAJC's future and the future of the work. The content of those conversations were then compiled into a report that The Spark Mill shared with LAJC Board members and Leadership Team.

Soak: September 2021 – October 2021:

Through multiple different dedicated planning retreats with the Leadership Team and the Board of Directors, we digested what we learned from the report and developed a broad framework for the plan. The framework described each of the four impact areas of the plan with examples of goals and activities. Following revisions based on additional feedback sessions with internal and external stakeholders, the Board of Directors formally approved the framework on October 21, 2021.

Radiate: October 2021 – June 2022:

Over these eight months, our staff worked within interdisciplinary teams of attorneys, organizers, administrative, and support staff through an iterative process to workshop the language of each impact area statement (the why), to identify goals (the what), and then to develop a timeline of activities and assignments (the how). Each set of components was shared with the Board of Directors across multiple board meetings as they were developed. The plan was finally formally approved by the Board on June 16th, 2022.

### **Acknowledgements:**

First thank you to the many community partners who shared their honest thoughts with us through The Spark Mill team. We hope that you see in this plan your dreams for what LAJC can be, and we invite you to continue to push us to be better. Thank you to The Spark Mill, for your flexibility, guidance, and appreciation for working hand in hand with our collection of incorrigible troublemakers. Thank you to LAJC's Leadership Team and staff for putting so much effort into this process while keeping the wheels of justice turning day-to-day. This kind of journey is never a comfortable one. It was an honor to struggle through with you. Finally, thank you to our intrepid Board President, Cynthia Neff, and our entire Board of Directors for trusting the process, trusting our staff, and ultimately trusting community to lead the way.

# LAJC STRATEGIC PLAN

June 6, 2022

## **IMPACT AREA A: LAJC'S WORK IS CENTERED IN DEEP PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITIES\* DIRECTLY IMPACTED BY SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE:**

In order to create long-term, sustainable, and community-driven change, LAJC advocates strive to build meaningful, ongoing, and accountable relationships of trust with communities directly impacted by systemic injustice and to support those communities in wielding their own power against the systems that create and perpetuate poverty. LAJC advocates are already engaged in community-driven advocacy, and our unique combination of direct services and impact work allows us to build long-term power while simultaneously responding to a community's most urgent needs. We must build on what we have learned about applying a community-driven lens to both individual and systemic work and embed that approach across the organization.

That means articulating a unified vision for community-driven advocacy, breaking down silos and increasing collaboration across the organization, and strengthening our integrated advocacy model, which allows us to use a combination of strategies—individual legal representation, impact litigation, communications, policy advocacy, and organizing—to achieve a community's goals. It also means increasing unrestricted and/or aligned funding, so that we can center the voices of directly affected community members in directing resources where they will have the most impact, and improving communication and transparency with outside stakeholders so that they can meaningfully influence LAJC's priorities and how we deploy our resources.

Finally, it means rethinking how we structure our work, ensuring that existing and new programs embrace the intersectionality of systemic oppression, promote cross-program collaboration, and are responsive to emerging community priorities. We plan to start by expanding our commitment to workers and workplace justice, which was named during our stakeholder process as an area for increased focus and an opportunity to build strong cross-program partnerships.

## **GOAL A1: Design and strengthen internal structures to effectively respond to community\* needs.**

- 1.1** Describe the LAJC approach and how our community-driven advocacy model informs all our strategies.
- 1.2** Continue to invest in LAJC's model of integrated advocacy strategies.
- 1.3** Increase cross-program communication and collaboration across the organization because people lead multiple-issue lives.
- 1.4** Invest in systems and processes that ensure organizational values-based decision making is consistently implemented across the organization

## **GOAL A2: Build communications and development strategies to create a more complete public understanding of LAJC while building support for the organization as a whole.**

- 2.1** Create a common language resource for communicating about LAJC.
- 2.2** Create and execute a communications plan that integrates messaging about our work as a whole into digital and print and markets LAJC as an entire organization.
- 2.3** Develop a fundraising plan that emphasizes support of the whole organization through unrestricted giving from both donors and institutional funders.

## **GOAL A3: Expand our commitment to building worker power.**

- 3.1** Set forth a vision rooted in collective power, unity and solidarity, where power and decision-making are centered in working people
- 3.2** Create a new program with a structure that promotes cross-program collaboration and reflects the values and multi-disciplinary approach we take in our work

## **IMPACT AREA B: LAJC'S MULTI-STRATEGY APPROACH TO ACHIEVING JUSTICE BENEFITS VIRGINIANS STATEWIDE:**

In many ways, LAJC's system-wide policy advocacy, communications, organizing, and impact litigation already have statewide impact. But as stakeholders voiced throughout this process, it is impossible to work in true partnership with a community without having some form of geographic presence. More than 415,000 Virginians living below the poverty line, and many more under 200% of poverty, do not have access to an unrestricted legal services program, meaning that federal law does not permit the legal services organizations in their neighborhoods to organize, file class action litigation, or engage in policy advocacy on their behalf. And undocumented immigrants in those areas do not have access to legal services at all, leaving them with no recourse when they face eviction, discrimination, wage theft, medical debt collection, and myriad other potentially catastrophic events.

Our community listening process led us to Hampton Roads, an area that contains more than 21% of Virginia's low-income population but has limited access to the type of services and advocacy LAJC provides. Community groups in Eastern Virginia have been inviting us to work with them for many years on issues ranging from education to legal support for immigrant communities. Before we establish a physical presence in Hampton Roads, we plan to continue listening and learning on how best we can complement and build on existing community networks, including the federally funded legal aid.

Finally, we recognize and embrace the challenges of fulfilling our vision for community-driven advocacy at the statewide level. We will design concrete strategies that grapple with the pace, opacity, and structural limitations of employing community-driven advocacy strategies in lawmaking, litigation, and other work with statewide impacts. We will also look for ways to center the voices of communities where we do not have a current physical presence, recognizing and supporting existing networks of directly impacted communities in those areas.

## **GOAL B4: Expand statewide, starting with physical presence in key localities in need.**

**4.1** Ensure expansion to a new geographic region is community-centered.

*This strategy is embedded in the other activities of this Goal.*

**4.2** Establish a physical presence in Hampton Roads.

**4.3** Expand advocacy and services in Petersburg area.

**4.4** Explore expansion of unrestricted legal services over time to establish a presence in more localities around the state.

## **GOAL B5: Explore and define how we center the voices of directly impacted communities\* across the state in our work with statewide impacts.**

**5.1** Create guidance for how LAJC centers community voices in our statewide advocacy.

**5.2** Identify opportunities to partner with community organizations and other legal aids within communities where LAJC does not have a current presence. In our partnerships, we commit to prioritizing directly impacted people and organizations run by them.

**5.3** Define work with statewide impact.

## **IMPACT AREA C: LAJC'S WORK ADVANCES THROUGH SHARING POWER AND RESOURCES WITH COMMUNITIES THAT ARE UNDER-RESOURCED**

LAJC has always accomplished its mission through partnerships with clients, partner organizations, volunteers, and others. We simply cannot achieve our goals without the knowledge, skills, time, and labor of other people and organizations, many of whom would qualify financially for our services. This assistance has often been freely given, as part of mutual aid in pursuit of common goals. As we become more community-centered, we are also asking more of our partners: we are asking them to contribute their experiences and expertise, to share their relationships, to vouch for us with their networks, and to spend time in meetings and in consultation with us. Our stakeholders also urged us to recognize that as we get bigger, we have an increasing obligation to share our resources and support the communities we serve in ways that are not solely through the services we provide.

It is not in LAJC's mission to become a funder. But we do already direct financial resources to community partners, sometimes by building them into grant budgets, sometimes by contracting with them for specific services they provide, and often by connecting them to donors and funders who then support them directly. We plan to build on our experience and design a fair process for identifying and directing support toward our community partners. We recognize this is a complicated project fraught with profound legal, ethical, and relational considerations. But we see it as absolutely critical to our mission to support the development and success of efforts led by directly impacted people and organizations.

We can also support those efforts by increasing the in-kind legal, organizing, and technical support that we provide to community-led organizations. For example, we already provide dedicated organizing support, fundraising consulting, serve as general counsel, and provide other support to myriad groups and organizations (e.g., PHAR) led by low-income community members.

## **GOAL C6: Share power and resources with members of communities and organizations that are under-resourced to build collective power.**

- 6.1** Develop and implement a process for directing financial resources to community partners and for identifying those partners.
- 6.2** Investigate paying for labor from low-income community partners who help us do our work (including interns and fellows).
- 6.3** Use our legal and organizing expertise to support community groups in achieving their goals.
- 6.4** Explore providing technical support and capacity building expertise to community groups.

## **GOAL C7: Engage community members as shared decision-makers by adopting transparent and consistent organization-wide standards.**

- 7.1** Create organization-wide procedures for how community members are consulted and informed in program and campaign planning as well as intake priorities.
- 7.2** Increase transparency in how resources are shared with community partners.

***The tactics for this Goal have been incorporated into Goal C.6.***

- 7.3** Ensure community voice is imbedded into all work through a robust organizing strategy.

## **IMPACT AREA D: LAJC'S VALUES ARE OPERATIONALIZED IN THE INTERNAL CULTURE AND STRUCTURE AND AFFIRM LAJC AS AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE WITHIN THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND RACIAL JUSTICE NONPROFIT SECTOR**

In our last strategic plan (2019), LAJC explicitly committed to focusing on issues of racial equity because of the clear evidence that poverty is connected to race and therefore our anti-poverty work must be based on the foundation of racial equity. For many years, we have increasingly recognized that we cannot achieve the change we wish to see in the world unless we ourselves adopt deliberate anti-racism policies and practices. Two years ago, we set out to adopt a more formal process to guide our work around improving race equity both internally and externally. The resulting Race Equity Plan was created through a staff-driven process and was adopted by our Board in December 2021, and has now become embedded in our strategic plan.

We also re-commit to supporting our staff by offering competitive salary and benefits packages, a respectful and welcoming “whole human” office culture, and strengthening our administrative and operational systems to support and sustain our strategic advocacy work.

Improving race equity and organizational culture is an ongoing process. As we implement these plans, we will track our progress, evaluate results, share information with staff and Board, and update our plans in order to continue making progress.

## **GOAL D8: Further embed racial justice and anti-racism work throughout the organization**

**Note: The vehicle for Goal D8 is the Race Equity Plan.**

- 8.1** Uphold LAJC's commitment to race equity work
- 8.2** Maintain a more equitable organizational culture
- 8.3** Recruit, hire, and retain a diverse workforce
- 8.4** Develop accountability and partnerships with communities of color
- 8.5** Apply an anti-racist analysis to programs, advocacy, and decision-making

## **GOAL 9: Emerge as a supportive, welcoming, and enjoyable place to work by offering competitive salary and benefits packages and a respectful "whole-human" office culture**

**Note: The vehicle for Goal D8 is the Race Equity Plan.**

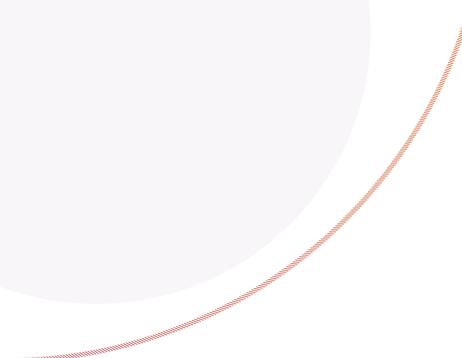
- 9.1** Provide competitive compensation and benefits package
- 9.2** Enhance and promote use of opportunities for rest and recovery
- 9.3** Communicate LAJC's work environment outside of the organization
- 9.4** Offer permanent flexible work
- 9.5** Maintain a culture of radical love and acceptance and support of each other

## **GOAL 10: Strengthen Operations and Administration to be more transparent, effective, and efficient in support of our mission and values**

- 10.1** Refine and implement more systems that support and sustain our strategic work
- 10.2** Ensure adequate operational and administrative staffing
- 10.3** Enhance and promote new systems through training and internal communication

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