



WHO | WHY
WHAT | HOW
Report 2022-2023

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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

This report covers a time where the phrase “back to normal” was regularly used to describe our new post-pandemic existence, often in tones that implied a sense of relief. But for clients of the Legal Aid Justice Center, “back to normal” has meant resuming mass evictions, large-scale health insurance disenrollment, and the return to other “normal” policies and systems that harm low-income communities and communities of color every day.

The U.S. brought tens of millions of people out of poverty in 2020 because we simply changed policies. We expanded safety net programs that meet basic needs like health insurance, food assistance, and unemployment benefits, created rent and mortgage relief programs, enacted student loan repayment moratoria, and more.

These programs were not charity. They were policy choices born of a fleeting recognition that all but the wealthiest of us are just one disaster away from poverty, and that our collective well-being is served best by meeting everyone’s basic needs. Now that we are “back to normal,” and we are rolling back pandemic-relief programs, we are currently experiencing the **biggest poverty increase in half a century.**

At the Legal Aid Justice Center, our “normal” is to dig deep and be ready for any challenge—whether it’s an unprecedented global emergency or the everyday crises of poverty that our policy choices have produced.

This report tells the story of how we fight for justice by combining direct legal advice and representation to clients with community-driven systemic advocacy. We organize alongside community partners, file impactful lawsuits,

advocate for broad-level policy change, and amplify our clients’ stories, all with the goal of building power in low-income communities and creating lasting change. At LAJC we treat the underlying symptoms of poverty and injustice while working for a cure.

- We fight illegal evictions and help hundreds of people stay in their homes while advocating for affordable housing and expanded tenants’ rights to prevent people from facing court process at all.
- We represent immigrants facing deportation while also pushing to end collaboration between local law enforcement and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), keeping people out of detention and with their families.
- We work to end the nightmare of unpayable court debt through legal representation of individual clients while also advocating for permanent change in the use of fines and fees for low-income Virginians caught up in our legal system.

I hope that in reading this report you see clearly who we are, what we do, how we work, why we approach the work the way we do, and how that all comes together to be the mighty force for change that is the Legal Aid Justice Center.

Angela Ciolfi
Executive Director

WHO WE ARE



We partner with communities and clients to fight for racial, social, and economic justice by dismantling systems that create and perpetuate poverty.

- We believe that the individual legal problems of our clients are linked to systems of injustice and oppression.
- We believe that legal and organizing strategies can dismantle the social, racial, and economic systems that keep people in poverty.
- We believe poverty is a racial justice issue.
- We believe that creating long-term, sustainable change in communities experiencing poverty is the foundation for our advocacy.
- We believe direct representation is part of our strategy to fight systems of injustice and oppression.
- We believe that by viewing individual cases as part of larger social and political systems, we are able to set our priorities and distribute our resources for the greatest positive impact.
- We commit to making sure we and the organizations we work with operate in ways that align with the race equity and justice values and goals we support. This includes making sure race equity is reflected in recruitment and hiring, organizational culture, communications, and community partnerships, especially with low-income communities of color.



FOR COMMUNITIES WITH COMMUNITIES

A summary of our **2022-2026 Strategic Plan**

We will further center our work in deep partnership with communities directly harmed by systemic racism.

It is critical that we build trusting relationships with communities directly harmed by systemic racism. We want to meet a community's urgent needs for survival by providing them with individualized legal help, while also helping them build their power as a group so that they can shape their own futures.

We will expand to achieve justice for people across virginia.

Our policy advocacy, communications, organizing, and impact litigation already have statewide impacts, so 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 will 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 systemically under-resourced communities, so we must look for ways to share our resources and invite them into decision-making.

We will 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 for 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 on workers and workplace justice
- Invest in our health justice efforts with the creation of a new program dedicated to tackling the vast systemic disparities in access to healthcare and public benefits.
- 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

HOW WE WORK

We fight for justice by combining direct legal advice and representation to clients with community-driven systemic advocacy.

We organize alongside community partners, file impactful lawsuits, advocate for broad-level policy change, and amplify our clients' stories, all with the goal of building power in low-income communities and creating lasting change.

Individual Representation:

As a legal aid organization, we provide direct legal representation to eligible, low-income clients on a variety of issues. This can relieve some of the immediate impacts of systemic oppression on individuals and families and can free directly affected community members to lead the work.

Policy Advocacy:

LAJC's policy advocacy is crucial to dismantling systems of oppression and holding government accountable to the community. We work to enable robust participation by directly impacted community members by lifting up their expertise to policymakers, strengthening partnerships with community led groups and coalitions, and by providing community partners with technical assistance and access to those who hold power.

Community Organizing:

We foster collective strength with people facing oppression in Virginia to end historic imbalances of power and wealth. We organize and support community groups to grow leaders, strengthen communities, and develop tactics and strategies that will create long-lasting change.

Impact Litigation:

We use lawsuits as a powerful tool to defend a community's rights, create leverage for movements, and challenge the legal structures that maintain and perpetuate poverty and injustice. When we encounter issues that could be effectively litigated in a way that could benefit everyone experiencing the issue, we work with impacted people to challenge the injustice in court.



Community Education & Outreach:

We share knowledge with and from community members most directly impacted by legal and other complex systems that affect their lives. We aim to make the law, legal tools, and systems accessible to everyone, while also learning from those directly impacted how those systems can be improved.

Communications:

We weave public-facing communications work into everything that we do. We amplify community voices and stories to influence change and to share information on legal rights, opportunities for action, and important developments affecting our communities.



WHAT WE DO



Consumer & Medical Debt

We fight to protect consumers who have been targeted by predatory businesses and lenders by providing them with legal support and advocating for systemic reforms.

Criminal Legal System

We advocate alongside those impacted by the criminal legal system against the harms of policing, incarceration, and the court system.

Healthcare & Public Benefits

We promote health equity by dismantling legal and financial barriers to healthcare access and protecting and advancing people's rights in the administration of public benefits programs, such as unemployment, food stamps, cash assistance, and disability insurance.

Housing

We defend tenants' rights, fight mass eviction, and dismantle legal and other barriers to safe and affordable housing.

Immigration

We work alongside immigrant communities to fight the deportation, detention, and separation of immigrant families, end ICE abuses of immigrants, and include immigrant youth in state benefits like in-state tuition.

Workplace

We organize alongside and litigate on behalf of migrant, immigrant, and low-income worker communities across the Commonwealth to advocate for better working pay and working conditions on a local, state, and national scale.

Youth, Family, & Schools

We provide legal services to youth and families and advocate for changes that keep young people in school, out of the criminal legal and child welfare systems, and protected from discrimination.



PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE



Helping tenants to keep their homes during a time of crisis

Individual Representation and Housing Advocacy

Mr. Lawrence Holland, who lives not far from our Charlottesville office, fell behind in rent and reached out to us in the fall of 2021. **“I’d kept getting sick from time to time, and I had to use a lot of money to keep myself safe. I had to pay people to take me [to the hospital]. And then some of the money, I’d put on this house.”**

Finally, in March of 2022, after numerous delays with the Rent Relief Program and back and forth correspondence with his landlord, our team helped Mr. Lawrence secure nearly \$10,000 in rent relief. This covered all his back rent as well as three months of future rent to provide him with a cushion to get back on his feet. Due to this assistance, Mr. Lawrence was able to stay in his home, and he is still living there today.



When renters in Virginia—already struggling with one of the highest eviction rates in the country—confronted the economic consequences of a global pandemic, the results were catastrophic. The Virginia Rent Relief Program (RRP) was launched in response to grassroots demands to help struggling tenants stay in their homes by providing both back rent and up to three months of future rent ... but only to those who met the program’s stringent eligibility requirements.

LAJC built interdisciplinary teams in Northern and Central Virginia to help tenants access these home-saving funds. Our assisters filled out long and complicated RRP applications, persuaded reluctant landlords to supply information, and advocated with state officials when applications hit snags or tenants suffered long wait times. Meanwhile our lawyers fought for tenants in court, often staving off eviction long enough for funds to be awarded or using the power of the court to compel landlords to cooperate with the program. We also fought to remove systemic barriers in the application process, such as language access, in an effort to connect more people with rental assistance.

In less than a year, our team of four bilingual rent relief assisters helped more than 600 families obtain more than \$4 million in rental assistance before the program stopped taking new applications in May of 2022.

In addition, from January 2022 to June 2023, our legal team helped 355 households win their housing cases and provided 892 additional households with critical legal advice that helped them understand their rights and their options to help them resolve issues on their own.

In Albemarle County our team discovered a housing complex where the management company was refusing to cooperate with tenants’ rent relief applications, instead waiting on the program to end, thereby allowing them to evict and rent the units for more money. LAJC represented many of the 79 households facing eviction, and through legal, organizing, and media advocacy, convinced the management company to cooperate and withdraw all 79 planned evictions.

Working to ensure access to healthcare

Individual Representation and Healthcare & Public Benefits Advocacy

In December of 2022 Brenda came into our Richmond office because she had been incorrectly denied FAMIS (Family Access to Medical Insurance Security) prenatal insurance coverage for her pregnancy and birth, putting her in a really tough financial situation. She said, **“They kept telling me I needed some documents but never specified which ones. The pediatrician told us he couldn’t see the baby if we didn’t pay. We felt hopeless and alone for months until I heard about LAJC from another community member.”** (translated from Spanish)

We immediately helped Brenda put in new applications for coverage and then appealed the coverage start dates to make them retroactive. After two hearings, we were able to get full coverage for the baby, effective the date she was born, as well as coverage for Brenda’s labor and delivery. We also proved that Brenda’s first application was processed incorrectly, so she should soon be receiving coverage for her prenatal visits.

Brenda said of our support, **“LAJC gave me hope again.”**



Cases like Brenda's are all too common.

Our Healthcare and Public Benefits team often files administrative and court appeals for people who have been denied Medicaid coverage in error.

The end of pandemic-related continuous coverage in Spring 2023 only exacerbated these issues. Currently the state is reassessing the eligibility of every Medicaid recipient as part of the national Medicaid "unwinding" after the public health emergency. 140,000 Virginians have already lost coverage, and 400,000 people are expected to lose coverage in the final analysis.

Our team is working to hold the line on insurance coverage by setting up a hotline, doing outreach to health services providers, correcting errors in the Medicaid eligibility determination, and helping individuals sign up for alternative insurance.

As part of the Enroll Virginia network, our healthcare navigators have provided expert help for Virginians who are trying to enroll in low or no-cost health insurance through the Affordable Care Act (ACA). From January 2022 to June 2023, our team helped 789 people apply for Medicaid and ACA health insurance, while also supporting 196 families with appeals and accessing hospital financial assistance.

Protecting the rights of immigrants in Virginia

*Impact Litigation, Individual Representation,
Community Organizing, and Immigration Advocacy*

In 2019, an Annandale father, originally from Guatemala, went to a routine check-in with an immigration officer. To his surprise, he was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). He and his family endured four years of suffering. ICE even unlawfully deported him at one point, though we filed a federal lawsuit that forced the agency to bring him back to the U.S. But in early 2023—after two federal district court lawsuits, a Fourth Circuit appeal, and countless immigration court hearings—the entire family won legal status and is finally safe in the knowledge that all of them can stay in the United States permanently. Their daughter is now in fifth grade and plays the violin in her elementary school orchestra, and their son is now a senior in high school.



Our team fights alongside immigrant families both inside the courtroom and out. Recently, together with local partners, we've won important victories in our campaign to De-ICE Virginia. In Arlington, LAJC organizers and attorneys worked with La ColectiVA and the National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild to pressure both the County Board and the Sheriff to end cooperation and communication with ICE. They worked to connect, educate, and mobilize directly impacted community members and allies to testify and hold meetings with policymakers. Their advocacy resulted in a County Board approved "Trust Policy" ending most forms of police collaboration with ICE, as well as commitments from the outgoing Sheriff to critical policy changes, including an end to the common practice of "courtesy calls" to advise ICE when immigrants are being released.

In Alexandria, the Sheriff was also convinced, after pressure from the community, to terminate the contract that had allowed ICE to use the city jail to hold immigrants for up to 72 hours while awaiting transportation to detention centers. We continue to work with our partners at Tenants and Workers United and members of the Alexandria community in advocating for a more immigrant-friendly Virginia. We have also partnered with immigrants' rights groups such as Dreamer Mothers In Action to present regular virtual and in-person Know Your Rights workshops on the frequently changing federal immigration laws.

From January 2022 to June of 2023, our legal team represented 187 individuals in immigration cases and provided critical legal advice to an additional 297 individuals who were not at immediate risk, helping them understand their immigration options and find the assistance they need.

Stopping the damage of court debt

Policy Advocacy, Individual Representation, Impact Litigation and Criminal Legal System Advocacy

In Spring 2023, we met Georgia, whose court-imposed fines, fees, and restitution had ballooned over time to nearly \$10,000. **She had received a letter threatening incarceration because of her debt.** Due to her age and disability, her only source of income was social security, which wasn't enough to make the payments. Georgia was represented by a law student in one of our clinics, with supervision and support from LAJC attorneys. Citing federal protections for social security recipients, the clinic student successfully argued that she should not have to pay anything. The judge waived the fines and fees and then converted the restitution into a civil debt so that she no longer faces the threat of debtor's prison, and her social security benefits will be protected from garnishment.



This is just one example of how Virginia’s criminal and traffic court systems impose hundreds of millions of dollars of court debt each year, disproportionately impacting low-income people and people of color and draining limited resources from their communities. This debt can be for everything from penalty fines to fees for court-appointed attorneys and the empaneling of juries.

Our work with Georgia paralleled work we have done for other individual clients who live solely on social security, seeking recognition of their inability to pay. That work, in individual court filings in both the Richmond and Charlottesville areas, has resulted in the waiver of thousands of dollars in debt. We are also working to educate Virginia’s court system on available federal protections, so that low-income people across Virginia who live on Social Security can have their rights respected.

In 2022, we also held a series of listening sessions with people who were directly impacted by court fines and fees. Insights from these listening sessions, and other outreach in the past, has informed both our direct representation and policy advocacy work in support of people facing these hardships.

Our previous work in communities identified the issue of Virginia taking away driver’s licenses from people unable to pay court debt. In 2018, LAJC won a court decision (in *Stinnie v. Holcomb*) that stopped enforcement of the law against the plaintiffs, and later lobbied the state’s General Assembly to freeze and then repeal the law.

In 2023, we won a key victory in the final chapter of *Stinnie*: a ruling from the full Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals overturning twenty-year-old precedent that prevented civil rights plaintiffs from being awarded attorney’s fees in cases like ours. This ruling means that future civil rights plaintiffs in all five states covered by the Fourth Circuit will have a more reliable path to challenge unconstitutional and harmful laws, and governments will be discouraged from defending them and engaging in gamesmanship calculated to avoid paying the plaintiffs’ litigation costs.

Coming Home

*Community Organizing, Individual Representation,
and Housing Advocacy*

This year, the first group of public housing residents in Charlottesville moved into their new homes, thanks to their decades of advocacy and grassroots organizing.

Almost twenty years ago, the Public Housing Association of Residents (PHAR)—the Charlottesville organization that is 100% run by public housing residents—began a push for redevelopment of the approximately 400 units of outdated and run-down public housing located in seven sites across the City. Led by Audrey Oliver and Joy Johnson (who currently serves as Vice President of LAJC’s Board of Directors), and working with staff from LAJC who serve as organizing support and legal counsel for the association, PHAR prevented an effort to redevelop using Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD), a program from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development that would have privatized Charlottesville public housing and, at the time, would have dramatically reduced the rights of residents.

PHAR then defined what redevelopment should look like when it developed a Resident-Directed Positive Vision for Redevelopment and Residents’ Bill of Rights for Redevelopment, which listed residents’ demands for any redevelopment project, including:

- Resident involvement throughout the planning and redevelopment process; and
- One-for-one replacement of the affordable housing units
- Improvement of resident quality of life.

Through the hard work and advocacy of PHAR members, the Residents’ Bill of Rights was successfully passed by the Charlottesville City Council and the Housing Authority Board of Directors in 2008.

Doing what many thought impossible, PHAR cultivated a partnership with Riverbend Development, which set forth a new and innovative funding path for public housing redevelopment that would honor the residents' vision. In addition to the developer's financial contributions, this partnership between the housing authority, PHAR, and Riverbend Development secured nearly \$15 million in funding from private sources.

Throughout the long process, PHAR and its members stayed active in the planning and execution of redevelopment, including creating a cohort of resident planners who helped create the entire site plan for one of the sites. PHAR also advocated before Charlottesville City Council and secured millions of dollars for the redevelopment projects. Our LAJC housing team stood with PHAR every step of the way and provided legal support for their efforts.

After years of collaboration, negotiation, planning, advocacy, and action, the first of the redeveloped sites is now welcoming residents home, and residents are happy with the upgrades! The other sites are proceeding on track, with some being fully redeveloped and others being modernized and updated, in all cases bringing the standard of living far up from the dilapidated and substandard housing that existed before. In total, 375 units will be redeveloped. But even more historic, additional deeply affordable housing units will come online as a part of this endeavor at a time when affordable housing is disappearing across the nation.

While public housing redevelopment can often be a time when residents lose rights and housing, due to the efforts of and creative partnerships among PHAR, Charlottesville public housing residents, developers, the housing authority, and community partners, resident voices have been prioritized, and redevelopment has been a net gain for everyone.



Fighting for every child to have access to a high-quality public education

Policy Advocacy, Public Relations, and Youth Advocacy

In 2019, we helped launch the Fund Our Schools Coalition (FOS), a growing group of advocacy organizations, parents, students, and teachers. **FOS efforts combine policy advocacy, community organizing, and communications work to push for greater state investment in our public schools, with a particular focus on racial and socio-economic equity.**

In 2022 and 2023, the Coalition continued to move our agenda forward through in-person events, press conferences, social media, and policy advocacy at the state level. Teams from FOS met regularly with legislators, researched and briefed elected officials on potential legislation, and testified on behalf of good education policy, and against bad, at the General Assembly.

The final state budget included some big wins for the Coalition, including the prevention of large, permanent tax cuts, mostly lifting the recession-era “support cost cap” that has cost schools billions of dollars since 2009, winning an additional \$900 million in direct aid to schools, and delivering a one-time infusion of more than \$400 million in flexible funding going directly to low-income school districts.

We were also able to stop a number of negative initiatives, including bills seeking to divert public funds to private schools through voucher and education savings account programs.

The Fund Our Schools Coalition is continuing its work to ensure every student and every family has the right to a high-quality public education regardless of their school district.

You can learn more about this work at www.fundourschoolsva.org.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE



BOARD OF DIRECTORS, ADVISORS, AND STAFF



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 Yohance Whitaker, Organizer

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

Jose Miguel Tejero, Organizer

WHY SUPPORT LAJC?

In the fight against poverty, we get results.

- Every year, we **defend** thousands of people in and out of court from eviction, financial exploitation, deportation, denial of affirmative rights to education and public benefits, and more.
- Together with community and coalition partners, our impact campaigns have **won new rights**, such as the right to drive legally regardless of immigration status.
- We have **enforced existing rights**, such as forcing the state to release over one billion dollars in illegally withheld unemployment benefits during the pandemic.
- We have **ended abusive or unconstitutional policies**, such as the repeated incarceration of unhoused alcoholics and local zoning laws originating in Jim Crow.
- And we have protected or **secured new investments** in our collective well-being, such as expanding preschool and winning millions of dollars in equitable education funding.

We are committed to the long-term fight for racial justice.

There are no quick wins when it comes to **fighting systemic racism and poverty**. For example:

- It took **six years** to repeal Virginia's most sinister form of debtor's prison, which automatically suspended 300,000 to 400,000 driver's licenses each year for inability to pay court debt.
- The effort with and on behalf of public housing residents to avoid demolition of their homes and achieve one-for-one replacement of public housing units in Charlottesville **spanned decades**.
- And we have multiple big cases that have been pending for **more than five years**.

Achieving structural change takes time, persistence, sustained resources, and the ability to adapt strategy and tactics to complex and ever-changing circumstances.



We are accountable to the people and communities we serve.

To create long-term, sustainable, and community-driven change, LAJC advocates:

- Build meaningful, ongoing, and accountable relationships of trust with communities directly impacted by systemic injustice.
- Support those communities in wielding their own power against the systems that create and perpetuate poverty.
- Combine direct services and systemic advocacy in ways that allows us to build long-term power to shape our future while simultaneously responding to a community's most urgent needs.

Effective + Committed + Accountable = LAJC

Our work is community-driven, but our ability to do the work is driven by your financial support. We count on your support because—unlike government or foundation funding—every dollar you give to LAJC is unencumbered by rules against lobbying, organizing, or filing lawsuits.

Your support helps us to center the voices of directly affected community members in directing resources where they will have the most impact.

So please join us and the individuals and communities we serve in the fight for the structural change needed to end poverty.

Please give to the Legal Aid Justice Center.

Support our work by scanning the following QR code:



Charlottesville Area:

1000 Preston Ave., Suite A
Charlottesville, VA 22903
(434) 977-0553

Northern Virginia Area:

6402 Arlington Blvd, Suite 1130
Falls Church, VA 22042
(703) 778-3450

Richmond Area:

626 East Broad St, Suite 200
Richmond, VA 23219
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