LEGAL AID
JUSTICE CENTER

Annual Report
2025-2026

FROM THE ARTIST

"Exhale" reimagines the figure of Lady Justice as a woman of the people, drawing from the familiar imagery of the blindfold and scales while presenting justice as both liberation and an act of endurance. Her grandiosity comes not from her stature, but from her strength and willingness to carry the weight of righteousness for her community.

I was interested in the emotional complexity of pursuing justice, particularly the spaces of hurt, frustration, and vulnerability that exist alongside the hope of being heard. "Exhale" centers the moment after that struggle: the long sigh of relief, the widening of the arms, and the raising of the chin that comes with reclaiming one's voice. Her entire body becomes an offering to her community and to the pursuit of justice.

Color became an important part of communicating that sense of liberation and joy. Yellows, oranges, and blues ground the mural in a distinctly Virginian landscape, while dogwood flowers surround the figure as both an uplifting visual element and a symbol of her role as a protector of the city. Together, these elements transform justice from an abstract ideal into something embodied, communal, and deeply human.

— Sahara Clemons

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ICE
OUT OF
SCHOOLS
STOP
END 287g

Message from the

Executive Director

Dear LAJC community,

We are used to seeing justice depicted as a zero-sum game. Picture the scales that symbolize our legal system: if the pan on my side of the fulcrum goes up, yours must come down. When the scales reach equipoise, equally balanced on both sides, that's justice.

Or is it? When we asked Sahara Clemons to decorate the reception area of our Charlottesville headquarters with a joy and justice-oriented theme, she gave our space much more than a refresh. In her mural, a Black woman stands with her arms flung wide, half of the scales in each hand—but instead of holding steady at equilibrium, both pans are lifted upwards, spilling dogwood blossoms into the air around her. It's a vision of justice not as balance, but as a positive force that lifts and builds a brighter future for all of us.

In the pages of this report, you'll read stories about people and communities who rejected the notion that their oppression or impoverishment is necessary for others' enrichment. You'll read about the scholarship fund that took big risks to protect a future where young immigrant Virginians can realize their college dreams, about migrant workers who stood up to a labor contractor to protect their rights, and about a family pushing back against an uncaring medical insurance system to keep their child healthy.

We are grateful to all of the clients, community partners, financial supporters, and others who joined together this year to lift up a bright and just future for us all to enjoy.

Onward and upward,

Angela Ciolfi
Executive Director

The Legal Aid Justice Center works alongside communities and clients to fight for racial, social, and economic justice. Together we are dismantling systems that create and perpetuate poverty.

What We Do

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.

Criminal Legal System

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

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.

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.

Housing

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

Workplace

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

Serving People

From July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2026, LAJC:

Served nearly 12,000 community members with legal representation, know-your-rights presentations, and/or organizing technical assistance.

Closed 2,813 cases, including releasing 27 people from immigration detention.

Returned or preserved over $8,800,000 in the pockets of our clients through our casework.

Represented 32 families whose Medicaid benefits were cut off by a computer error, recovering more than $3 million in lost benefits — and pushed for a systemic fix that corrected 1,752 additional cases and prevented errors in 33,000 more.

Ended the exclusion of approximately 4,000 Virginia farmworkers from Virginia's minimum wage protections.

Won an immigration habeas case challenging the Trump administration's mandatory detention rule that has been cited more than 300 times by courts in more than 30 states.

Helped pass more than 30 new laws expanding rights, protections, and opportunity for low-income Virginians.

Freedom Won

Ankle monitor worn by M.H

M.H., a Southeast Asian artist, entered the U.S. at the end of 2024, fleeing violence from Islamic fundamentalists in his home country. He moved to Virginia, where he correctly followed immigration procedures, filing for asylum and even wearing a painful ankle monitor, but was then suddenly and brutally arrested and detained by ICE.

LAJC attorneys represented M.H. at his bond hearing and won, but a change in longstanding policies just days before he appeared in court made him—and most other immigrants—ineligible to be released on bond, despite the immigration judge having granted his release.

So, we pivoted. We knew prolonging M.H.'s detention was a violation of his rights, so we gathered evidence and filed a habeas petition in federal court—and won. A federal district court judge ordered M.H.'s immediate release and made clear that his continued detention, and the Trump administration's policy that allowed it, was unconstitutional. M.H. is now home with his family, supporting them while he works with LAJC to find a pathway to remain in the U.S. permanently. His case has since been cited more than 300 times by courts in more than thirty states in cases where the administration's policies have unjustly deprived immigrants of their freedom.

Cinthia and Erick were forced to flee Nicaragua after being subject to political persecution. Erick was represented by UVA clinic students with LAJC and granted asylum in early 2025, but because they weren't married at the time, Cinthia still needed to defend her own case.

LAJC represented Cinthia and, at her final hearing in January of 2026, presented over 700 pages of evidence documenting the Nicaraguan government's persecution of political dissidents. The immigration judge granted her asylum that day, without further deliberation.

Cinthia and Erick can now live safely in the United States with their U.S. citizen daughter. They are building a life together, working and paying taxes in Virginia and preparing to send their daughter to school.

Cinthia and Erick with LAJC attorneys Madeline Sachs and Elizabeth Schmelzel

Manufactured home park residents with their fence

Protecting Home

Over 400 residents currently live in a quiet, close-knit manufactured home community in Chesterfield County, an area with few, if any, similar affordable housing options.

After the park was sold to new owners in 2022, the new owners and the county government tried to enforce long-ignored building codes, leaving many community members suddenly facing displacement. LAJC's housing organizers and trusted long-term partners stepped up to help build solidarity and power among residents and push back to save their cherished homes and community.

Through persistent advocacy with park owners and county government, residents successfully negotiated an agreement that both follows county rules and keeps many more community members safely in their homes.

But this isn't where the story ends. LAJC's work with communities like this isn't just to fix one-time issues—it's to support our neighbors in knowing their rights and developing the skills to fight back against the unjust policies and practices of those in power.

So, when the property owners recently threatened to remove all neighborhood fencing—fencing that keeps their children, pets, and homes safe—community members again came together and executed a unified, multi-pronged campaign (including a yard sign campaign pictured here) that again brought the owners to the table to negotiate a fair solution.

LAJC is proud to help communities like these all across Virginia in recognizing and building their own power to shape the rules we live by.

scan to see more

Towards Justice

In May 2026, after 14 years, our federal civil rights class action lawsuit seeking better conditions for incarcerated Virginians at the Fluvanna Women's Correctional Center (FCCW) officially concluded. Filed in 2012 after an investigation into the deficient medical care provided by the Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC) to people detained at FCCW, named plaintiffs Cynthia Scott, Toni Hartlove, and Erin George were represented by LAJC, Wiley Rein LLP, and the Washington Lawyers' Committee.

Scott v. Clarke successfully settled in February 2016, leaving in place a court-appointed monitor to ensure the agreed-upon improvements in care were implemented and sustained. The lawsuit contributed to systemwide improvements, such as adopting electronic medical records both at FCCW and at all other VDOC institutions, an ever-improving medication-assisted treatment (MAT) program for substance use, improved dental care, a high-quality physical therapy program, and significant improvements in mental health care.

Lead plaintiff Cynthia Scott with her daughters

Despite these vital changes, significant problems remain that are outside the scope of our lawsuit. We are grateful for the privilege of working with our courageous clients at FCCW, and we continue to advocate for them by fighting to expand geriatric and medical parole and pardons.

scan to see more

Graphic recording by Jim Nuttle

In October 2025, we co-hosted the Strengthening Justice Summit—a two-day convening focused on transforming Virginia's legal system through data-driven solutions, collaborative policy reform, and community-centered practice. Focused primarily on pretrial practices and fines and fees policies, we heard from leaders, advocates, and community members who are driving the Commonwealth towards truer, more equitable justice.

Jim Nuttle documented the event with Graphic Recording, live note taking that involves both words and illustrations.

Community members gathered outside the General Assembly in February 2026

Supporting Immigrants

LAJC is fighting hard to protect our immigrant neighbors and limit ICE activity and abuse of power in Virginia. In January 2026, after months of collecting documents through public records requests submitted to local and state law enforcement agencies and regional jails across the Commonwealth, we published an online resource detailing the dozens of agencies that had voluntarily entered into agreements with the federal government to use their resources to enforce federal immigration law in collaboration with ICE agents. These arrangements are most often called "287g agreements." The online resource mapped where these agreements were in place, detailed how these agreements work and how they harm communities, and provided access to all the documents we had obtained for anyone to see.

During the 2026 General Assembly session, LAJC and partners worked tirelessly to pass a

new law limiting how Virginia law enforcement can collaborate with ICE and other federal agencies, including via 287g agreements. The passage of this monumental legislation is the result of nearly a decade spent fighting back against local collaboration with ICE alongside immigrant leaders, immigrants' rights organizations, and advocates across the Commonwealth.

Since the law's passage, we have seen some progress: Riverside Regional Jail and Caroline Detention Facility have stopped detaining individuals on behalf of ICE, and a number of 287g agreements have been terminated, bringing Virginia's total number of contracts down from 32 to 24.

But the work is not done yet. In September 2026, a federal judge blocked the law from going fully into effect after the federal government filed suit. As of printing, current 287g agreements may still exist, but new agreements are prohibited. This is a developing situation; please visit our website or social media pages for updates.

scan to see more

In an eleventh-hour call to action over the New Year holiday, LAJC stepped in to prevent immigrant students in Virginia from losing access to in-state college tuition through the Virginia Dream Act. The Trump administration sued to end the law, and the very next day filed a joint motion with the outgoing Virginia state officials to nullify it. LAJC, along with the ACLU of Virginia, swiftly filed an emergency motion to intervene on behalf of the Dream Project, an organization that serves immigrant students pursuing higher education across Virginia, demanding that more voices be heard before a decision was reached to overturn an act of the General Assembly. In a win for our immigrant communities, the joint motion was denied, leaving the door open for the new state administration to perform its duty to defend the law.

Where did your Christmas tree come from?

Virginia is the sixth-largest producer of Christmas trees in the country, with nearly all of the trees coming from rapidly industrializing farms in Southwest Virginia. Planting, maintaining, harvesting, packing, and shipping Christmas trees and holiday pine decorations is grueling work with long hours in dangerous conditions—work that is overwhelmingly done by migrant workers.

Our newly updated multimedia production tells the stories of some of these workers, the challenges they face, and the community that supports them. We continue to take their stories to policymakers and advocates in the fight for a comprehensive minimum wage, overtime, and other protections for workers in Virginia.

Scan to see more

Solidarity with Workers

Workers and advocates present at the conference

In June 2026, LAJC hosted our second annual Farmworker Advocacy Network Conference on Virginia's Eastern Shore. We brought together farmworkers, advocates, policy and legal experts, and organizers from across Virginia who are fighting to improve the living and working conditions of our state's migrant and agricultural workers. We heard firsthand accounts from farmworkers on the impacts of lower pay, poor living conditions, and extreme heat.

Longtime workers' rights advocates, Leticia Zavala and Maria Mejia from El Futuro es Nuestro (The Future is Ours), a worker-led organization at the helm of the U.S. labor movement, spoke of their current work, while our partners at the Agricultural Workers Advocacy Coalition (AWAC) detailed efforts to improve farmworker access to resources such as food, AC window units, and WI-FI. A group of Virginia Tech students presented on their creation of short-form videos in Spanish tailored to farmworkers with helpful tips, like how to open a U.S. bank account and avoid scams. A wreath-making workshop offered hands-on experience with one example of the challenges of Christmas tree farm work.

Our team at LAJC has been fighting back against labor traffickers in Virginia for decades, helping workers reclaim what they are owed and holding employers accountable. We recently settled a case on behalf of more than 350 agricultural workers who experienced extensive abuse at the hands of Las Princesas, a farm labor contracting company that for years took advantage of limited rules and oversight of the H-2A visa program to traffic and exploit workers in Virginia and North Carolina. They confiscated workers' passports and IDs, housed them in deplorable conditions, provided inadequate food, and forced them to work hours upon hours of unpaid overtime. They also warned employees that speaking out or leaving the farm would lead to being fired and deported.

Farmworkers on the Eastern Shore of Virginia

Each of the hundreds of workers involved in Las Princesas' brutal scheme is now eligible to receive compensation for their labor and mistreatment, and the company is barred from using the H-2A visa system.

Getting the care needed

Across the country, including here in Virginia, people face increasing restrictions on accessing vital public benefits programs. LAJC has helped hundreds of families navigate the complexities of health care and health insurance and has represented numerous clients as they advocate for the care and support they need.

We recently represented the parents of a one-year-old child, Alayah, who requires significant care and assistance due to a rare, severe skin condition that causes serious wounds and blistering, preventing almost all direct skin contact. When Alayah's parents sought authorization for just 25 hours per week of Medicaid personal care coverage to allow them to properly care for their child, the insurance company denied all but 10 of the requested hours. They insisted that the family had failed to properly fill out the request form and, more appallingly, that all one-year-olds require significant assistance with activities like bathing, and Alayah was no different. Alayah's family had proof at home that this wasn't true. Alayah has a twin brother who does not have the condition. He requires just 15 minutes to be bathed, while Alayah needs a minimum of three hours in a process that involves delicate wound care and special bandages.

With help from the law students in LAJC's Health and Disability Law Clinic at the University of Virginia, our team won a full reversal of the decision—allowing Alayah's family to continue providing the personal care coverage she needs.

One-year-old Alaya

Ensuring everyone can learn

Our client and her son walking home from school

An 8-year-old with autism was forced to stop attending his school after the school refused to allow his privately paid aide to support him in class. Without this vital help, the child faced significant behavioral challenges, multiple suspensions, and was restrained several times, resulting in physical injuries and a PTSD diagnosis. Isolated at home with only a few hours of instruction per week, he quickly fell behind.

LAJC worked to file a complaint with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and, through tenacious and unwavering advocacy, our special education attorneys ultimately reached a resolution that will give this student the opportunity to receive a meaningful education and adequate resources at a private school. This was no small win; parents typically lose more than 90% of similar cases with the VDOE.

"Nothing makes me happier than for [him] to be safe, belong, learn, and have the best quality of life that he can!" said his mother. "He has made so many friends and found a community where he is accepted and cherished. He has made meaningful progress and absolutely loves his school ... being able to send him to this private school is making a pivotal difference in our lives. Thank you all so much for helping us achieve this."

Our report, Learning in Every Language: Guaranteeing Access and Opportunity for Virginia's English Learners, reveals how gaps in state and federal funding, inconsistent language access services, and inadequate accountability undermine educational outcomes for nearly 150,000 K-12 English Learner students across the state. This resource was crucial to the 2026 passage of Virginia's "Language Access for English Learners" law, which ensures that vital documents are translated to allow equal access for all students and parents, regardless of their primary language.

LAJC attorney Ruby Cherian provides/gives testimony at the Virginia General Assembly

Championing Change

The 2026 Virginia General Assembly brought some major victories for LAJC, our partners, and communities across the Commonwealth. Of the thousands of bills considered by legislators, 21 of LAJC's priority bills made it to the governor's desk to be signed into law. We co-led campaigns on another 10 bills that were also enacted.

We are particularly indebted to the advocates who invested tremendous care, thoughtfulness, and passion into this legislation, some of which has been decades in the making. We saw renters share powerful testimony on the importance of tenant rights; over 50 students and adults show up to proudly represent Latine and immigrant communities; union and community members supporting heat stress protections for farmworkers form a line so long it wrapped around a committee hearing room; and community members join together for a frigid, early morning march urging legislators to get ICE out of Virginia communities.

Thanks to these tireless efforts, we now have bills that will better protect immigrant families and open up more pathways to citizenship for young immigrants; help relieve the burden of court debt; guarantee minimum wage access and workplace safety for more employees; give all students a fair opportunity to thrive in our classrooms; improve communication and transparency for those receiving public benefits; and allow all Virginians to feel safer in their communities.

We also published new resources to highlight policies aligned with LAJC's priorities and practice areas and to serve as educational resources for community members, advocates, and partners to better understand their rights and protections.

We began the year with the intention to work hand in hand with clients and community partners to champion policy change for a more just and equitable commonwealth. Together, we accomplished just that—and are ready to continue the fight in the next General Assembly session.

scan to see more

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— Ginger Geoffrey and John Andelin, LAJC supporters for more than 20 years

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"Sacred teachings admonish us to welcome the stranger. To truly welcome the strangers in our community is to make them know that they are home and safe. Tragically, there are so many people among us who do not feel welcome or safe based on who they are or where they are from. LAJC is at the forefront of creating and defending the legal framework so needed to support a welcoming environment. That is why we love LAJC's commitment and support its work."

— Dana Martin and Leyda Fajardo,
LAJC supporters for more than 7 years

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Gail Munger and Sonjia Smith are community members who deeply admire LAJC's work and commitment to "More Justice, Less Poverty." Given the increased need for services in the current climate, they have both enthusiastically prioritized their charitable giving to focus on LAJC's mission. Thanks to their commitment, gifts to the Smith-Munger Challenge were matched 4-1, turning $2 million given by the following donors into a total of $10 million. We are deeply grateful for their partnership, and to everyone who helped meet the match. Thank you!

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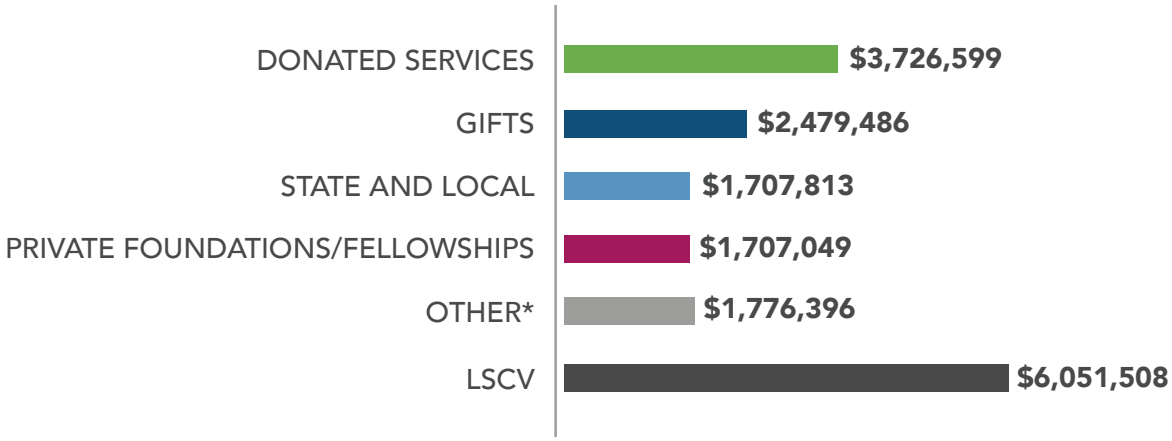
Revenue

FISCAL YEAR 2026

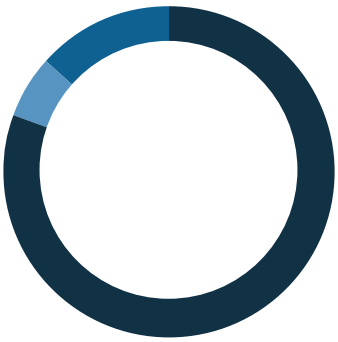
TOTAL
$17,448,851



*includes investment income, clinic income, rent.

Expenses

FISCAL YEAR 2026



PROGRAMS	**$14,874,381**
FUNDRAISING	**$1,126,219**
ADMINISTRATION	**$2,425,396**

TOTAL
$18,425,996

As planned, LAJC strategically drew down funds raised in previous years to meet our budgeted expenses. This enabled LAJC to meet the immediate needs of our clients, who are in crisis. In addition, the draw down covers the loss of federal funds that LAJC decided to forego to better prote-ct our clients from federal overreach.

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