

2021 Major Advocacy Report





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Introduction

Poverty should never be a barrier to justice. Yet the clients and communities the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles serves often face formidable barriers to receiving the resources, services, and respect they are due. With the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to equal justice became further strained for poor community members, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) residents of Los Angeles County. The glaring health disparities suffered by communities of color led to greater hospitalizations and deaths from COVID. Poor communities also had a greater need for basic services and resources to stay healthy, safe, and financially secure — necessities that many residents in more affluent neighborhoods take for granted. Thus, the need for LAFLA's services became more pronounced as the pandemic persisted throughout 2021.

LAFLA provides free, high-quality legal services to Los Angeles County residents living in poverty through direct representation, systems change, and community education. In 2021, most clients and community members accessed our services remotely, as we closed our in-person locations in alignment with public health recommendations for much of the year. Nevertheless, we helped more than 100,000 Los Angeles County residents in 2021, including 12,105 through our self-help legal access centers, approximately 3,500 at outreach events, and 1,435 through our medical-legal partnership clinics.

The 2021 Major Advocacy Report highlights the year's efforts to enhance our assistance to individual clients by also working to more broadly challenge conditions of poverty and injustice. We achieved positive change at the local, state, and national levels through our impact litigation, policy advocacy, and community collaborations — all driven by the pursuit of racial justice and equity. The pandemic cast a light on many of the issues for which our legal team fights, including language justice and right to counsel, leading to tangible, beneficial differences for working-class and poor families and individuals, due to LAFLA's advocacy. The work remains unfinished, the fight for equal justice continues, and change is sometimes incremental: Nevertheless, we celebrate the successes, partnerships, and progress LAFLA and our partners made in 2021 on behalf of Angelenos living in poverty. Together we hope and strive for the equitable future in which we all believe.

Racial Justice

The impacts of institutional and structural racism are widespread and intrinsically linked with the need for LAFLA's legal services. Systemic racism has resulted in a chasm between BIPOC and white community members in terms of access to equal justice and opportunity in all facets of life, including education, housing, employment, and health care.

Since its inception in 1929, LAFLA has provided holistic legal services and advocated for policies that address the blatant gaps wrought by structural discrimination, spanning multiple areas of law: housing and community justice; economic justice; family law; immigration; reentry; veterans' issues; and language justice — the last of which addresses disparities faced by those with limited-English-proficiency, the vast majority of whom are BIPOC immigrants.

This report will explore the ways in which LAFLA staff have fought for racial justice and equity through impact litigation and policy advocacy, including some of the examples mentioned below.

Housing & Community Justice

Homelessness and eviction are by-products of racism in America. The affordable housing crisis disproportionately impacts communities of color who have the highest rates of poverty in California. Furthermore, according to the 2020 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count, 34% of people experiencing homelessness across Los Angeles County are Black or African American, compared to only 8% of the total population in the county. Furthermore, there is a clear connection between homelessness and eviction as 59% of the County's newly unhoused participants cited economic hardship as the reason they became unhoused. Research indicates that Black and Latinx tenants, particularly women, are the most likely to be evicted. A Southern California study found that as the number of Black residents in a neighborhood increases, so does the number of eviction cases. From street sweeps to sheriff lockouts both homelessness and eviction are subject to criminalization efforts.

LAFLA understands the interconnectedness of racial justice, eviction defense, and the civil rights of the unhoused. Our work addresses the legal needs of both the unhoused community and tenants at risk of becoming unhoused. Our advocates work in close alignment with communities to build power and address systems of oppression, through such innovative initiatives as the community land trust model.

Economic Justice

Systemic racism is inextricably linked with poverty. Institutionalized practices of racial exploitation and discrimination over generations have resulted in deep inequities in wealth and economic security. LAFLA works to increase economic stability, mobility, and opportunity for BIPOC individuals and communities.

For example, **LAFLA's consumer law practice is centered around making systemic change to the student loan system, to level the playing field for students of color.** Student loan debt collection practices disproportionately impact people of color because, due to historical economic injustices, BIPOC students often have to take out more in private student loans to obtain a college education and BIPOC college graduates often have lower earnings and therefore often cannot repay the loans, ending up in default. Similarly, because a disproportionate number of people of color enroll in (and are targeted by) for-profit schools, which account for the vast majority of sudden school closures, retroactive closed school discharges will provide the most economic benefit to this population. LAFLA's individual cases and policy work in this area are targeted to move the needle for BIPOC education borrowers.

Racial and economic inequities also drive disparities in health outcomes. LAFLA is working across practice areas to reduce these vast disparities for both children and adults of color. Numerous studies have documented that racism is a social determinant of health that negatively impacts BIPOC communities. In 2021, LAFLA responded to a request for comment on legislation focused directly on eliminating racial disparities in healthcare for childhood chronic diseases. 1.6 million children of color in California suffer from childhood chronic diseases. Children of color often come from communities with the fewest resources and are thus less likely to receive adequate medical care to treat their conditions. LAFLA commented in support of this proposed legislation which seeks to close such racial gaps in childhood chronic diseases by providing better access to low or no cost healthcare. Additionally, our medical-legal partnership at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Outpatient Center is intentionally embedded within the Black community of South Los Angeles, designed to bring together the skillsets of multiple disciplines to improve health outcomes and reduce racial disparities in the community it serves.

Domestic Violence

The government's response to the pandemic left staff and clients in a situation of rapidly growing racial injustice. As remote hearings, filings, and innovations surged, the courts shrunk in-person services and frequently discouraged their use as an option of last resort. Although the court's tech advancements benefitted well-resourced litigants and attorneys, those also left behind many clients on the other side of the digital divide.

LAFLA provides essential domestic violence resources to survivors of color who feel they have nowhere else to turn because of mistrust of police, or a fear of reporting because of their immigration status. LAFLA worked hard to mitigate those harms in numerous ways — demanding the elimination of remote hearing and filing fees, holding the courts accountable on access to justice, utilizing the Family Law Coalition to advance and amplify advocacy, and more.

Furthermore, LAFLA’s advocacy around survivors and their children entangled in the child welfare system is largely driven by a racial justice mission. Many families are entrenched in the dependency court due to racism and bias against domestic violence survivors, people living in poverty, and the linguistically marginalized. LAFLA aims to redefine and change how survivors and children are treated by DCFS, law enforcement, and the dependency court. This is a multi-generational problem for many survivor clients who were foster youth themselves and/or have had DCFS remove their children. By advocating for survivor parents to avoid DCFS and dependency court involvement, LAFLA strives to eradicate systemic racism and to substantially change how state institutions have traditionally revictimized low-income and minority survivors and their children.

Immigration

Racial justice and equity are critical to LAFLA’s immigration practice. **Advocates’ dedicated work to meet the needs of Afghan nationals illustrates LAFLA’s commitment to serving vulnerable communities most in need** — providing direct legal services to this marginalized group to advance collective liberation and eliminate racial disparities in the provision of legal services.

Staff also actively participate in events aimed to ensure the Black community has access to quality legal assistance with immigration-related matters. As a result of world events unfolding for Haitian refugees, staff members reached out to the Haitian Bridge Alliance to foster a partnership and facilitate client referrals. It is well-documented that the country’s 4.3 million Black immigrants face additional hurdles finding much-needed free legal assistance. As many as 12 percent of all Black immigrants entered the country as refugees or sought immigration help through humanitarian pathways such as asylum. LAFLA’s participation in community fairs that are aimed at the Black immigrant community as well as strategic partnerships help ensure that Black immigrants are informed about their legal rights and have greater access to free legal assistance.

Reentry

According to Race Counts citing 2013-2015 data from California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, white residents of L.A. County were incarcerated in state prisons at a rate of 1.6 per 1,000 people; whereas BIPOC community members were incarcerated at much higher rates: 20.8 per 1,000 people for Black communities; and 4.3 per 1,000 people for Latinx communities. The Prison Policy Initiative reports that unemployment rates for formerly incarcerated individuals are five times higher than unemployment rates for the general population; even greater disparities exist for Black individuals. Even if employment is secured, formerly incarcerated individuals and those with drug convictions typically have the least secure and lowest-paying positions, again with greater disparities for Blacks.

Given these horrendous disparities, **LAFLA has multiple re-entry projects embedded within Black neighborhoods in Los Angeles to intentionally partner with and support these communities**, including our Project Impact site at the Watts Labor Community Action Network and the DOORS Re-Entry Project.

Veterans Justice

LAFLA's work with veterans often entails addressing issues at the intersection of race and military service. While enlisted, systemic and individual racism intersect which results in service members who are BIPOC have a 32-71% greater likelihood of discipline across all military branches and are three times more likely to be separated from the armed forces with "bad paper" discharges.

LAFLA's Veterans Justice Project is particularly focused on discharge upgrades and expunging records that create barriers to accessing valuable veterans' benefits, healthcare, employment, and housing. More than 70% of LAFLA's veteran clients' cases completed in 2021 were for BIPOC veterans and more than 80% of LAFLA's veterans who seek record expungements are BIPOC.

Housing & Community Justice

LAFLA's housing practice focuses on unlawful detainer defense, affirmative litigation, and policy advocacy. Additionally, LAFLA has a long-standing commitment to upholding the civil rights of individuals experiencing homelessness and engaging in litigation that challenges unlawful practices that harm individuals experiencing homelessness. LAFLA also engages in community engagement and community economic development advocacy.

Preserving and expanding affordable housing remains a critical issue in Los Angeles County. According to a 2021 report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, there are only 20 affordable and available rental housing units for every 100 extremely low-income households in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

Impact Litigation

Garcia v. City of Los Angeles: The litigation challenges the seizure and destruction of property belonging to individuals experiencing homelessness and living in tents and makeshift encampments. The case impacts thousands of individuals who are living in tents and makeshift encampments in the City of Los Angeles and subjected to practices that have been challenged as unconstitutional.

LA Alliance v. City of Los Angeles: LAFLA represents intervenors in litigation brought by property owners, challenging alleged nuisance conditions in Skid Row. Intervenors sought to protect the civil rights of individuals experiencing homelessness and avoid unnecessary service disruption or practices that harm the rights of unhoused individuals.

GHP Management Corporation v City of Los Angeles: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Los Angeles adopted wide-ranging eviction protections, including a moratorium on evictions due to COVID-19-related rental debt. A property developer filed suit against the City's COVID-19 moratorium in federal court, seeking to have the moratorium declared a taking under the Fifth Amendment and for the City to be held liable for millions of dollars in alleged damages. LAFLA, along with co-counsel, represents intervenors in the lawsuit to represent the views of impacted tenants and moved to have the case dismissed.

St. James v. Bills and WIB Holdings, LLC: LAFLA and co-counsel filed this suit after a Santa Monica landlord refused to accept the Section 8 voucher from an elderly and disabled tenant on a fixed income. LAFLA filed under Santa Monica's source-of-income discrimination ordinance, and included other causes of action including tenant harassment, unfair business practices, and elder abuse. The City of Santa Monica also filed a related case.

Appeals

Rochelle v. Jake: The court erroneously found that because the client's unit did not have a certificate of occupancy, that was enough to evict the tenant regardless of what their underlying eviction notice stated or any of the tenant's affirmative defenses. Since the trial court erred in its finding, an appeal was filed. After briefing and oral arguments, the appeal was granted for the tenant.

Coast MH LLC. V. Van Duyn: In Coast MH LLC. V. Van Duyn, a pending appeal is based on a denial of attorney fees that should have been awarded in the unlawful detainer. The trial court jury found in favor of LAFLA's client after lengthy eviction litigation, with LAFLA expending more than 200 attorney hours. The court refused to award LAFLA attorney fees, stating that non-profit legal aid organizations are not entitled to attorney fees because they are funded by grants and other public funds. The court's reasoning is that the defendant is not out of "pocket" any fees. This is incongruent to existing case law and so was appealed.

11120 Normandie v. Allen: LAFLA is defending an appeal based upon a trial court victory. The plaintiff listed a fictitious entity as the proper person to pay rent. Legislative history and interpretation of statute in case law states that a "natural person" must be identified in a nonpayment eviction notice. The landlord has appealed the trial court's decision. LAFLA expects to argue the case before the appellate division in 2022.

Policy Advocacy

Right to Counsel-LA Coalition: LAFLA is part of the Renters Right to Housing Coalition, which continues to advocate for a codified right to eviction counsel (RTC) for all low-income tenants in LA County. Such a codified right would ensure the long-term sustainability of the Stay Housed LA program, and together with RTC-LA Coalition members, LAFLA has advocated at the federal, state and local levels for legislation and funding to support this work. Specifically, LAFLA has worked to support AB 1487 – a statewide bill to fund right to counsel throughout California. LAFLA was also part of a task force to discuss SB 679, which would create a countywide agency for affordable housing development and a renters' right to counsel. LAFLA has met consistently with the LA County Board of Supervisors and City Council members in Los Angeles and other cities to educate them of the value of such a right and leverage federal and local funding for the program. Right to counsel is necessary to stop the mass displacement of low-income people of color from their homes and communities.

COVID-19 Tenant Protections: The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly affected the health and finances of the most vulnerable low-income families. Because of the threat of evictions and related landlord-tenant issues, LAFLA engaged in both statewide and local advocacy to ensure that the state, county, and cities adopted and maintained tenant protections during the COVID-19 crisis.

Mello Advocacy: The California Mello Act prohibits the removal of residential dwelling units for non-coastal-related uses and requires that affected existing affordable dwelling units be replaced, and that additional new affordable dwelling units be incorporated into projects, where feasible. In 2021, LAFLA worked to get the Los Angeles Mello Ordinance through two city planning commission hearings and the city council planning and land use management committee. LAFLA continued to push the City to strengthen the ordinance by removing ambiguities and loopholes that could result in a loss of affordable housing in the City's coastal zones.

Reasonable Rent Analysis Policy Change: LAFLA was successful in advocating a change in the Santa Monica Housing Authority policy regarding the determination of reasonable rent for Section 8 voucher holders living in deed-restricted units. In 2021 during the COVID state of emergency, a local landlord had proposed huge rent increases on the tenancies described above. The Housing Authority was set to approve those rent increases. Multiple LAFLA clients worried they would be unable to continue to afford their units, even with a voucher. LAFLA argued that based on the specific language of the Santa Monica deed restrictions at issue, those restrictions did not apply to Section 8 tenancies, and as such, there was no effective "deed restricted" housing at issue. The tenancies were not covered by the local rent control ordinance. Accordingly, LAFLA argued the state Tenant Protection Act applied to these units. Further, neither the landlord, nor the Santa Monica Housing Authority, had considered the rent increase restrictions under Penal Code Section 396. The Housing Authority ultimately agreed to apply the protections of the TPA to our clients' tenancies and denied the improper rent increases, as well as amended the way they conduct their analysis for future requests.

Long Beach Housing Policy: LAFLA successfully advocated for the Long Beach Emergency Rental Assistance Program to adjust their intake policies, hire community-based organizations to assist with applications, and remove application barriers for tenants in the city. LAFLA advocated for the City of Long Beach to further their fair housing efforts in their sixth draft of the Housing Element. The resulting advocacy letter influenced the California Housing and Communities Department to demand changes to Long Beach's draft. LAFLA worked alongside community partners to make it harder for landlords to remove tenants based on the substantial remodel "just cause" reason for eviction in the City of Long Beach. The new ordinance requires the termination notice to tenants to include copies of all permits issued and reasonably detailed information about the scope of the work and why it requires the tenant to vacate for more than 30 days. Additionally, it requires the landlord to pay two months of rent or \$4500, whichever is more, in relocation fees to the tenant. The ordinance also requires more data collection and creates a private right of action for tenants to sue landlords for violations.

Community Advocacy & Collaboration

710 Corridor Advocacy: The I-710 corridor is an artery for moving people and goods between the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and State Route 60. Pollution from the South Corridor of the 710 Freeway has a disproportionate impact on low-income communities and communities of color sited along the South Corridor. Proposed expansion of the 710 Freeway threatened to displace residents and increase the adverse environmental impact of Caltrans. LAFLA works with the Coalition for Environmental Health and Justice (CEHAJ) to elevate the voices of communities impacted by the proposed expansion of the 710 Freeway.

Coalition for Environmental Health and Justice: CEHAJ is a coalition of organizations working to achieve environmental justice and improve air quality, community health, and overall quality of life for residents living in the I-710 corridor in Southern California.

Community Land Trust Work: Community land trusts (CLTs) acquire existing properties where low-income tenants live, take those properties off the speculative market, and eventually sell partial ownership of the units to the tenants as a cooperative or other shared-equity model. The focus is on smaller, unsubsidized rental buildings, where approximately half of all LA County renters live. HoCo assisted several CLTs, such as TRUST South LA, Liberty Community Land Trust, and the LA Community Land Trust through the acquisition process.

Homelessness Roundtables: LAFLA participates in the Martin Luther King Outpatient Center homelessness roundtable with other service providers including Hopics and LA County's Whole Person Care on the medical campus to provide holistic care to patients. The purpose of the roundtable is to share resources, provide insight on how to provide supportive services and housing for the most vulnerable patients through various programs, and integrate our work generally. Providers discuss shelters and permanent housing options, as well as programs and opportunities to stabilize patients' living situations. LAFLA participates by providing legal updates and trends advocates see in our on-site clinic, as well as technical assistance to the service providers.

Long Beach Housing Justice Coalition: The Housing Justice Coalition is a collaborative group of non-profit organizations, community groups, and individuals with a mission to build community power by supporting tenant-led movements, passing policies that protect tenants, advancing equitable development that serves the community, and increasing community ownership of land. LAFLA provides legal support and technical assistance to the movement for housing in Long Beach. LAFLA has provided detailed analysis of the impact of proposed policies, drafted community education materials, and provided feedback about the impact of policies at the request of elected officials.

Santa Monica Senior Task Force: The Senior Task Force is a multidisciplinary committee made up of representatives from local Santa Monica service providers to assess senior clients in a holistic and intersectional way. LAFLA attends these meetings, with consent from our clients, to expedite their connection to other organizations and services, and provide expanded oversight of vulnerable Santa Monica seniors. LAFLA also assists Santa Monica seniors through a partnership with WISE & Healthy Aging.

Stay Housed LA: LAFLA is the lead contractor for Stay Housed LA, a City- and County-funded eviction prevention and defense program covering low-income tenants throughout LA County. Alongside the Liberty Hill Foundation, LAFLA coordinates 10 legal service providers and 15 community-based organizations to represent tenants in eviction court, provide counsel and advice at clinics, educate tenants about their rights and changing renter protections at workshops, and outreach directly to tenants via phone- and text-banking. In 2021, the program reached out to 425,000 tenants, held 353 workshops and clinics with 9,299 attendees, and provided 5,084 tenant households with legal services.

Economic Justice

LAFLA helps low-income individuals obtain and maintain public benefits to fulfill their basic needs such as Social Security benefits and state and locally administered cash benefits, healthcare benefits, and food benefits. LAFLA also fights wage theft and represents individuals appealing denials of unemployment insurance benefits. Additionally, LAFLA assists those who cannot afford to make student loan payments due to reasons including disability, and predatory, deceptive, or illegal lending practices by for-profit colleges.

Impact Litigation

Mekan v. Johnson, California Department of Social Services: Caregivers for foster children must have their home approved under the Resource Family Approval (RFA) process, a five-part process involving a background check, mandatory training, a home inspection, and a psychosocial assessment. Denial of RFA has several consequences, including denial of foster care benefits. LAFLA is representing a caretaker relative of a child in the dependency system who suffered sex discrimination and due process violations in the termination of her RFA. If this case is successful, indigent children whose relative caretakers are denied RFA based on sex discrimination will, among other things, have access to foster care benefits.

Policy Advocacy

Electronic Theft of CalFresh Benefits: After a victory in *Soza, Ortega v. Lightbourne, Department of Social Services* in 2020, LAFLA oversaw the issuance of statewide policy to comply with the Court of Appeals' order. This matter related to electronic theft of benefits through skimming, scamming, and other means and the lawsuit LAFLA brought on behalf of two recipients of CalFresh benefits who were the victims of such theft. The decision in this case overturned the then-existing state policy that denied replacement or reimbursement of CalFresh benefits to beneficiaries whose benefits were stolen electronically.

Student Loan Discharges: The U.S. Department of Education has refused, for more than 20 years, to grant automatic student loan discharges upon the closure of a college. Instead, the Department has required borrowers to submit a discharge application even though many individuals are unaware they are eligible for this relief. As a result, LAFLA has assisted many low-income student loan borrowers who, although eligible for a closed school discharge, suffered decades of wage garnishment, tax refund offsets, and ruined credit for student loans they had no obligation to repay. A senior LAFLA attorney who is a national expert in student loan matters and a LAFLA client testified before a Congressional committee regarding the Department's refusal to grant automatic student loan discharges to students harmed by sudden school closures and the impact on low-income borrowers. After the testimony, the Department agreed to consider amending the regulations to allow automatic closed school discharges in a negotiated rulemaking proceeding that was just starting. In the proceeding, the LAFLA attorney drafted a proposal, which the legal aid negotiators proposed and successfully convinced the Department to agree to, providing for mandatory closed school discharges retroactively for borrowers whose schools closed after 1985. LAFLA is now waiting for the Department to publish proposed regulations.

Private Student Loan Debt Collection: Since 2013, LAFLA and pro bono counsel have documented systemic abuses by private student loan holders in debt collection lawsuits. They often file multiple lawsuits against students and co-signor parents, a disproportionate number of whom are people of color. Borrowers face enormous judgments of five or six figures and face a lifetime of wage garnishment if they do not have an attorney to raise valid defenses, including those based on the statute of limitations and the plaintiff's inability to prove it owns and has a right to collect on the loan. In 2021, based on its experiences and expertise, LAFLA worked with the Student Borrower Protection Center, a nonprofit student loan advocacy organization, to draft and seek passage of a state law to prevent these abuses. California enacted AB 424 which, among other things, prohibits private student loan holders from suing and obtaining judgments when the statute of limitations has expired and the loan holder cannot prove that it is the real party in interest. It also provides extensive remedies to borrowers when the law is violated.

Welfare Fraud: LAFLA was invited by state legislator Nancy Skinner to provide input into the drafting of potential legislation related to welfare fraud. The policy focuses on welfare fraud detection, charging of overpayments, and referral of matters for prosecution. Many of LAFLA's low-income clients who have been overpaid welfare benefits that were originally charged as inadvertent household error are vulnerable to such being recharacterized as fraud. LAFLA's advocacy is to ensure that any new policies assessing overpayments or making prosecutorial referrals are done fairly and equitably.

Access to Community Welfare Office Services: County welfare offices closed soon after the pandemic hit in 2020. The offices remained closed for nearly 18 months. During this time, it was extremely difficult for low-income and indigent residents of Los Angeles County to access critical public assistance programs. LAFLA worked with partner advocacy programs to alert the county welfare office, the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), about the barriers to access faced by their client community, and to come up with strategies to improve access. LAFLA was able to get DPSS to improve the emergency in-person services while they were closed. LAFLA was also able to get DPSS to commit to providing a special e-mail address to the director's office when individual instances of denial of access occurred.

Community Collaboration

Public Benefits Advocacy: Often LAFLA collaborates with other legal services providers and policy advocates to address the myriad of issues that arise in the public benefits arena. In 2021, this included working with the Western Center for Law and Poverty on the legislation to memorialize the ruling in *Soza, Ortega v. Lightbourne, Department of Social Services* and working with Bay Area Legal Aid, Neighborhood Legal Services, Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations, Inc., and Public Interest Law Program on the proposed welfare fraud policies.

Seating Clinic: LAFLA partnered with Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center's renowned Seating Center, which helps patients identify and obtain customized wheelchairs and other equipment for their mobility needs. LAFLA advocates provide legal support to patients facing difficulty getting wheelchairs and other vital medical equipment approved by their insurance companies, including representation in the medical appeals process, with numerous favorable outcomes in both pre-hearing negotiations and the formal fair hearing process.

Student Loan Partners: LAFLA has an extensive network of partners nationwide with whom it collaborates on student loan matters. These include the Student Borrower Protection Center, National Consumer Law Center, and Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

Family Law

The increased need for domestic violence (DV) and family law services that arose during the early part of the pandemic continued throughout 2021. The court's self-help centers scaled back their family law services which significantly reduced the available resources for free family law assistance. To address this need, LAFLA expanded its weekly family law clinic to assist more clients and tailored its referrals to organizations with capacity to provide non-domestic violence restraining order (DVRO) family law services. LAFLA maintained the DV hotline throughout 2021 and briefly returned to provide in-person services at the Toll and Long Beach DV clinics in November and December 2021. Meanwhile, the Santa Monica DV clinic pivoted to providing online assistance through a twice-weekly Zoom clinic. This proved to be very successful and allowed LAFLA staff to continue helping DV survivors with applications for restraining orders despite the temporary closure of the physical clinic space. The clinic also advises on divorce and custody matters.

Policy Advocacy

California Paraprofessional Program Working Group (CPPWG): LAFLA is a member of the core family law legal services team advocating on behalf of low-income litigants to the California State Bar's CPPWG. The family law legal services community gave public comment and submitted written comments throughout the CPPWG meetings in 2021.

Remote Access to the Court: LAFLA was very engaged with policy makers in ensuring our client communities could benefit from remote access to the court system. LAFLA presented to the Judicial Council (JC), the rule-making arm of the California court system, on the lessons learned from COVID regarding court remote operations. This highlighted positives (e.g., email resource accounts, open communication with the LA family court), negatives (e.g., digital divide, poor communication, and language access), and the ways LAFLA and the Family Law Coalition bridged the gap. LAFLA also submitted comments to the JC regarding their proposed forms and rules relating to remote hearings. At least in part due to LAFLA's comment, the JC modified their proposed rule relating to notice requirements for restraining order cases. LAFLA also submitted a letter to the California legislature on remote access to courts.

DV and DCFS: LAFLA has continued to be a leading advocate on the intersection of domestic violence with the LA County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the child welfare system. LAFLA served as the co-chair of the Policy Subcommittee of LA County DV Council's DV and DCFS Ad-Hoc Committee. LAFLA led the drafting of policy recommendations for the Ad-Hoc Committee which is expected to be released in 2022. LAFLA has also continued its advocacy for DCFS-involved survivors through its participation and leadership in the legal services small-group advocacy team and other community meetings.

Community Collaboration

Allyship Program: LAFLA is a member of the Domestic Violence and Homeless Services Coalition Allyship Program as an Ally Community Leader. This program, led by the Downtown Women's Center and Rainbow Services, partners advocates with lived experience with advocates in the DV services community to foster dialogue, collaboration, and joint advocacy around issues of domestic violence and homelessness.

API Strategic Action for Ending Violence Coalition (API SAFE): The API SAFE Coalition is a collaboration between Asian and Pacific Islander (API) domestic violence service providers in Southern California. The coalition provides a platform for API agencies to exchange knowledge and gain insight and understanding to best serve API DV survivors. As a member of the coalition since its inception, LAFLA provides legal support to API DV survivors and technical assistance to other coalition members.

Family Justice Center (FJC) Remote Hearing Studio: LAFLA has continued to build on this remote hearing studio at the FJC. In 2021, LAFLA provided representation for three survivors through the remote hearing studio. A DV advocate was present for the hearings, for which advocates arranged transportation and achieved favorable outcomes. To publicize the remote hearing studio and remote hearings generally among survivors and FJC partners, LAFLA drafted and circulated a flier on the remote hearing studio and a guide to remote hearings to FJC partners.

Family Law Coalition (FLC): LAFLA has continued to advance the profile and advocacy of the FLC in the family law community. LAFLA has had regular meetings with Judge Riff and deputy supervising Judge Kaufman and held informal lunchtime discussions with Judges Swift, Warren, and Yang, among others. As the leader of the FLC, LAFLA serves as a primary point of contact for the court and the family law legal services community regarding updates and advocacy issues. Judge Riff has recognized FLC in several contexts: His April 2021 *Daily Journal* article, "Reflections on the Other Pandemic: Intimate Partner Violence," declared, "We gratefully thank our colleagues in the Family Law Coalition community for their commitment to justice and for their support of our restraining order court innovations." Judge Riff has also mentioned his appreciation and work with the FLC in Los Angeles County Bar Association town hall meetings and webinars with various family law bar associations.

Family Law e-Filing with the Los Angeles Superior Court: LAFLA worked extensively with the court and other DV legal services advocates to better understand the court's transition to e-filing and to advocate on behalf of low-income self-represented survivors. LAFLA's advocacy with the court contributed to its decision to waive envelope transaction fees for e-filing DVRO cases right when e-filing began in November 2021. LAFLA presented on e-filing to the county's Domestic Violence Council in December 2021.

Los Angeles DV Providers Group Legal Services Representative: The Domestic Violence Council (within the Office of Women's Health within the Department of Public Health) created this group of key domestic violence service providers at the start of the pandemic. Conference calls that occurred nearly daily in spring/summer 2020 moved to biweekly and then monthly calls in 2021. In addition to LAFLA, the group includes representatives from the Los Angeles Police Department, DCFS, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, the District Attorney's office, the City Attorney's office, the Mayor's office, DV shelter directors, Department of Mental Health, and more. LAFLA serves as the legal representative and provides regular updates regarding the court and law. LAFLA also coordinates resources and provides support.

Sojourn: LAFLA partners with Sojourn (part of The People Concern) to provide family and crisis counseling to survivors of domestic violence, as well as access to shelters and other services.

Immigration

In spite of federal immigration policy changes in 2021, these clients still faced a myriad of legal challenges. In addition, two humanitarian crises in 2021 impacted some of the most vulnerable immigrants. First, a large influx of unaccompanied minors fleeing violence presented themselves at our southern border. They were subsequently housed in temporary shelters at the Long Beach and Pomona convention centers. In addition, thousands of Afghan nationals fled Afghanistan due to violence at the hands of the Taliban and sought refuge in the United States. This was in addition to the thousands of other survivors who sought safety in the United States as a result of torture and violence in their countries of origin. Once stabilized, these clients needed further assistance to obtain legal immigration status, often in the form of U Visas, T Visas, asylum, legal permanent residence, and naturalization.

In addition to the humanitarian crises faced by our global community, clients who filed applications in the affirmative and defensive immigration contexts faced very long wait times and great uncertainty as a result. The pre-existing delays were exacerbated by court, consular office, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office closures due to COVID-19.

LAFLA advocates worked tirelessly by providing much-needed legal advice and representation pertaining to a wide variety of immigration matters. They also ensured that clients' due process rights were preserved by zealously representing clients in immigration removal proceedings. They responded to the most current trends such as the resurgence of prosecutorial discretion and stayed abreast of the rapidly changing immigration landscape. This resulted in several immigration removal proceedings being terminated or administratively closed. Finally, they skillfully navigated virtual hearings and helped ensure that their clients could meaningfully participate in a legal process that literally involved life-or-death consequences.

Policy Advocacy

Enhanced Services for Asylees and Vulnerable Non-Citizens Program: The California Health and Human Services' Department of Social Services planned to implement enhanced services for asylees and other vulnerable non-citizens residing in California. Prior to its implementation, LAFLA was invited by the California Refugee Program Bureau to participate in a workgroup formed to inform the implementation process.

Statewide Virtual Asylee Orientation: For more than a decade, LAFLA staff have created and provided monthly orientations to newly-granted asylees in partnership with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. As a result, the California Refugee Program Bureau sought out the participation and guidance of LAFLA staff in the creation of a statewide virtual asylee orientation.

Community Collaboration

API Human Trafficking Taskforce: The API Human Trafficking Taskforce is a collaboration to share best practices and trends to help stop human trafficking within the API community. This is a unique collaborative between service providers, community-based organizations, law enforcement, government agencies, and legal service providers including LAFLA that seeks to find holistic solutions to best serve API human trafficking victims.

LAFLA, Orrick, and UC Irvine Law School Permanency Project: This partnership provides legal representation to immigrant survivors of domestic violence and related harms by filing adjustment of status applications.

Liberty in North Korea: Staff met with Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) to discuss collaboration on future humanitarian parole cases from North Korea, and plan to screen new cases as the individuals arrive. LAFLA is also part of the discussion to create a coalition of service providers to discuss North Korea-specific issues. Staff continue to work with a LiNK case manager for an active North Korean asylum case and are poised to retain additional cases in an effort to help North Korean refugees obtain asylum and related immigration relief.

Los Angeles Asylum Coalition: LAFLA staff lead this coalition of community partners throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties that represent survivors of domestic violence with immigration applications and in removal proceedings.

Los Angeles County Afghan Refugee Taskforce: LAFLA staff were invited to be a part of the Los Angeles County Afghan Refugee Taskforce. On August 31, 2021, the LA County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a motion to provide assistance to new arrivals from Afghanistan. The motion directed the County's Chief Executive Officer to establish this taskforce, which is headed by the County Department of Immigrant Affairs in collaboration with the Office of Emergency Management, as well as all relevant County departments, state, federal, and non-governmental agencies at the discretion of the Office of Immigrant Affairs. The aim is to coordinate resources to serve newly arrived Afghan nationals resettling in Los Angeles County. As part of this taskforce, LAFLA has provided direct legal assistance to qualifying Afghan nationals. In addition, LAFLA has also participated in planning sessions for a pilot welcome center for Afghan nationals in 2022.

Los Angeles VAWA Network: LAFLA co-leads this important county-wide collaborative which consists of advocates who provide free- or low-cost legal services to survivors of domestic violence and other crimes. The LA VAWA Network is on the forefront of disseminating changes in immigration law that impact survivors of domestic violence. In addition, the network coordinated the 12th Annual U Visa Certifier Roundtable with local U Visa certifiers in November 2021 to strengthen support for immigrant survivors during these challenging times.

Nationwide Asylum Seekers Group: LAFLA staff were invited to co-lead an asylum seekers' group comprised of advocates from across the country who assist survivors of torture.

Language Justice

LAFLA has become a leader in providing linguistically and culturally intelligent legal services directed toward the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) community and other linguistically marginalized communities in the greater Los Angeles area. This pioneering language justice advocacy ensures that all communities, regardless of their primary language, have greater access to the courts, government benefits, and other social services.

LAFLA was one of the first legal aid organizations in the nation to establish a specialized project dedicated to assisting the growing Asian and Pacific Islander (API) community. Since its inception in the 1990s, LAFLA's API Community Outreach Project has become a leader in providing linguistically and culturally intelligent legal services directed toward the API community in the greater Los Angeles area.

Impact Litigation

DFEH Complaint Against EDD: In 2020, LAFLA and partner organizations filed an administrative complaint with the Department of Fair Employment and Housing asserting that the California Employment Development Department (EDD) had failed to provide adequate language access to individuals seeking to apply for unemployment benefits. Throughout 2021, LAFLA engaged in extensive mediation resulting in a settlement filed in Sacramento Superior Court in early 2022, wherein EDD agreed to provide meaningful language access for limited English proficient Californians seeking unemployment benefits. EDD will implement additional language hotlines, provide interpretation for other languages, and translate vital documents and forms into a variety of languages.

DFEH Complaint Against CDSS: The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) failed to provide meaningful language access in their administration of the Pandemic-EBT program which provides food assistance to households with children to replace lost school meals after school and child care closures in connection with COVID-19. LAFLA filed a DFEH complaint asserting violation of civil rights laws in the implementation of this program. As a result, CDSS made significant language access improvements in their second round of P-EBT issuances through expanded language lines and translation of documents into threshold languages. These changes will impact hundreds of thousands of households with school-age children where the primary language of the caretakers is not English.

Policy Advocacy

State Emergency Rental Assistance Program: According to a survey conducted by PolicyLink, 59% of respondents identified language access and 25% identified disability discrimination as barriers to accessing the state's rental assistance program. Alongside partners, LAFLA advocated to the California Department of Housing and Community Development and filed a complaint with the Department of Fair Housing and Employment to demand meaningful language and disability access for applicants to the state's emergency rental assistance program. The federal department of Housing and Urban Planning is investigating the federal claims.

Reentry

LAFLA addresses the core legal needs of communities impacted by the criminal justice system. Often, the same individuals affected by the criminal justice system experience housing instability or homelessness or face legal challenges involving citations, arrears in child support, or government benefits. LAFLA provides holistic legal services to remove legal barriers to reentry, offers community education, collaborates with community partners, and engages in systemic change to support the restoration of impacted communities.

Every reentry client of LAFLA's has disproportionately faced a lack of employment opportunities due to their criminal convictions. Providing expungement services improves clients' chances of finding gainful employment. Studies have consistently shown that employment is a key factor in reducing rates of recidivism. Providing individuals assistance with expungement services allows formerly incarcerated individuals to pursue higher-paying careers and obtain financial stability that was previously unavailable.

Policy Advocacy

Certification for Formerly Incarcerated Firefighters: LAFLA successfully advocated for legislation (AB 2147) that allows people who served their sentence through fire camp to apply for expungement. Prior to the passage of AB 2147, individuals faced barriers to gainful employment due to drug convictions despite fire camp training and high demand. Relief provided by AB 2147 is a significant step toward reentry.

Community Collaboration

Expungement Clinics: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, LAFLA conducted numerous in-person clinics, including a monthly expungement clinic in collaboration with the LA Law Library, periodic expungement clinics across Los Angeles County, and clinics specifically for veterans. During the pandemic, LAFLA has continued to operate expungement clinics, though in remote format, with plans to eventually resume hybrid clinics. Furthermore, the self-help staff has continued to assist individuals with petitions for expungement.

Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program: LAFLA has partnered with the Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP) to assist those eligible for AB 2147. LAFLA has hosted pro bono clinics in partnership with FFRP and taken cases on an individual basis.

Project imPACT: Through Project imPACT, a partnership with the City of Los Angeles to offer reentry services, staff collaborate with multiple community-based organizations such as the Watts Community Labor Center, Friends Outside LA, and Center for Employment Opportunities to offer legal services in the South, East, Downtown, and Watts regions of the City of Los Angeles. Project imPACT works to remove barriers to employment and increase the likelihood of clients' successful reintegration to the community by providing behavioral health services, legal services, and employment support services to individuals who have been arrested, charged with, or convicted of a crime.

Veterans

LAFLA provides the full range of legal services targeting the ever-growing vulnerable veteran population throughout Los Angeles County, particularly those with other-than-honorable or dishonorable discharges and those facing homelessness. As the largest veteran legal services program in Los Angeles, LAFLA provides holistic legal services for all veterans and their families, regardless of discharge status. LAFLA is able to do this work through its strong partnerships with local veteran-focused community organizations and service providers.

In 2021, LAFLA served hundreds of veterans with their various legal issues including housing, Veterans Administration (VA) and government benefits, immigration, criminal record clearing, family law, and student loans. As the COVID-19 pandemic entered its second year, the needs for stability among the veteran population grew. Throughout the year, LAFLA provided holistic legal services to veterans in accessing and appealing VA disability benefits and healthcare, securing and maintaining housing and housing subsidies, and removing the barriers associated with their criminal records.

Policy Advocacy

Legal Services for Homeless Veterans: Section 4202 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (the "Act"), Public Law 116-315, codified at 38 USC 2022A, establishes a new grant program to provide legal services to homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness. The Act requires the VA, in establishing criteria and requirements for grants under section 4202 of the Act, consult with organizations that have experience in providing services to homeless veterans. LAFLA provided initial feedback on the criteria and requirements for the new program that will inform the VA's development of the program, and ultimately assist the VA in creating a program that centers on the comprehensive legal needs of low-income veterans and which agencies are best equipped to deliver those services.

Community Collaboration

Compton Stand Down: In collaboration with the Compton Chamber of Commerce and dozens of other veteran-centered community-based organizations, the Stand Down is a multi-day event focused on providing a one-stop-shop for veterans. LAFLA provided on-site education and legal services to veterans and their families on an array of issues from character of discharge determination, discharge upgrades, VA benefits and other government benefits, housing, and record clearing.

HUD-VASH: In partnership with the HUD-VASH Long Beach case managers, LAFLA provides a monthly clinic to patients and referrals from case managers. Prior to the pandemic, services were provided on-site; throughout the pandemic, this clinic has quickly transitioned into a virtual clinic, reaching more veterans than before.

West Los Angeles VA Campus: The West L.A. Welcome Center clinic is a monthly clinic, held on-site at the West L.A. VA Campus in partnership with Manatt and UCLA El Centro Clinic Law Students. This clinic provides on-site legal services to veterans on the West L.A. VA campus in conjunction with other veteran service providers to provide a one-stop-shop experience for veterans.

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