

# Opening the Door to Impact

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



**THE  
PUBLIC  
INTEREST  
LAW CENTER**



Dear Friends,

As we share this report in 2025, our democracy, our communities, and our most fundamental rights face renewed and deeply serious threats. Across the country, efforts to roll back voting access, dismantle civil rights protections, and erode hard-won community progress are escalating. The urgency of this moment could not be clearer.

That is why the theme of this year's annual report, *Opening the Door to Impact*, holds such meaning.

In 2024, our clients, partners, and supporters like you opened doors that had long been closed. Together, we made space for justice, safety, opportunity, and community voice. This report highlights the impact of that work: renters who organized for safe, dignified housing; voters who went to court to protect their right to be counted; families who secured the tools to advocate for children with disabilities; and gardeners who challenged powerful institutions to defend land they have cared for across generations. In Southwest Philadelphia, neighbors facing harmful development built coalitions, negotiated with decision-makers, and won a seat at the table to shape what comes next.

Every one of these stories is rooted in partnership. They reflect the strength of communities working with both public interest lawyers and pro bono counsel from the private bar who are committed to justice. The law has too often been used to maintain inequality. Together, we are using it to dismantle barriers and build pathways toward equity.

This kind of impact does not happen overnight. It takes persistence, trust, and a commitment to stay in the fight long after headlines move on. In 2025, our work continues in courtrooms, city halls, schools, and neighborhoods across Pennsylvania. We are challenging voter suppression, holding state leaders accountable for school funding, and working to ensure that people with criminal records are not permanently shut out of opportunity. We are advocating for healthcare, housing justice, and communities that are safe, sustainable, and equitable.

To everyone who made our progress possible in 2024, thank you. Your partnership helps open the door to the change our communities deserve.

This is what public interest law looks like: grounded in people, rooted in community, and focused on justice every step of the way.

With gratitude and resolve,

Brent W. Landau  
*Executive Director*



# By the Numbers

**1,200+**  
units managed by  
Columbus Properties  
covered by a settlement  
to improve housing  
conditions

Over  
**\$1 billion**  
in Pennsylvania taxpayer  
funds spent on cyber  
charter schools with  
limited transparency

**360**  
Brith Sholom apartments  
preserved as affordable  
senior housing

**833**  
hours donated by  
volunteers

**\$494**  
**million**  
of new school adequacy  
funding following our  
successful lawsuit

**348**  
districts that received  
adequacy funding

**39**  
garden parcels we  
worked to preserve

**84**  
growers who attended  
Vacant Land 215 events

**56**  
pro bono attorneys

**1 in 3**  
working-age adults in  
the U.S. with a criminal  
record, who face a 25%  
unemployment rate

**1,850**  
Instagram followers

Approximately  
**18,000**  
Pennsylvania mail  
ballots with disqualifying  
errors in the 2024  
presidential election

**419**  
individual donors

**7**  
law student interns



# “We Made Sure We Were Heard”

## BRITH SHOLOM RESIDENTS FOUGHT BACK AND WON A PATH TO SAFE HOUSING

In the quiet Philadelphia neighborhood of Wynnefield Heights, Brith Sholom House was supposed to be a haven: one of the city’s few remaining affordable housing complexes for older adults. But for the residents who lived there, it had become a place of fear, neglect, and daily danger.

By 2019, the 12-story, 360-unit building had fallen into severe disrepair. Residents endured chronic leaks, infestations, unreliable heat and hot water, and a fire suppression system that didn’t meet code. Doors didn’t lock. Smoke detectors were missing. In the stairwells, tenants reported raw sewage and human waste.

When residents demanded repairs, the building’s owners refused to act. Instead, they petitioned the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas to allow them to keep collecting rent without fixing the violations. The court denied the request. When it became clear the landlord was still collecting rent illegally, the judge responded sharply: “That’s a violation of the law. How are you collecting money? How are you doing anything? You can’t do that.”

“They weren’t fixing anything. There were infestations. It was really bad. And they treated residents very poorly.”

– Steve Kohalmi, resident

Brith Sholom House’s owners let it fall into disrepair. Residents endured a hot water outage, a broken fire suppression system and hundreds of other code violations that put residents’ health and safety at risk.

In 2020, the Public Interest Law Center and pro bono co-counsel from Dechert LLP began representing tenants Diana Dukes and Samuel Wolfolk, seeking to enforce their rights. Although temporary Fire Code compliance was reached in 2022, the building quickly fell back out of compliance. In 2023, the Department of Licenses and Inspections issued more than 100 serious violations. The City declared the building an unsafe structure and a fire hazard.

By early 2024, tenants faced mass eviction. A sheriff’s sale was scheduled. PGW threatened to shut off utilities. The City began discussing condemnation.

At that moment, tenants and advocates began to mobilize more urgently. Law Center attorney and Independence Foundation Fellow Madison Gray met with residents to offer legal support and asked what outcome they wanted. Their answer was clear: they wanted to stay and they wanted the building fixed.

“When Madison showed up, she told us about our legal options—our rights. We learned how they were supposed to be treating us.”

– Marguerite Byrd, tenant council president

Tenants reconvened the Brith Sholom Tenants’ Council. They began organizing door to door, holding meetings, and speaking out publicly. Their protest outside the building drew media attention and signaled their refusal to be displaced.

“We did a protest out front with signs. The media must have heard about it, because they sure did show up.”

– Marguerite Byrd

At the same time, the Law Center launched an intensive advocacy campaign. Staff worked behind the scenes to coordinate with City Council, the Mayor’s Office, and the Philadelphia Housing Authority. They collaborated with pro bono co-counsel from Hausfeld and staff at SeniorLAW Center to research legal strategies. They pushed back against legal maneuvers by the court-appointed receiver and kept up public pressure through the press.

Brith Sholom tenants protesting outside of the building ahead of a critical court hearing.



Law Center staff and Brith Sholom tenants collaborated on an advocacy campaign that convinced PHA to buy and renovate the building.

This was legal advocacy beyond the courtroom. The Law Center, with tenant organizing support from Renters Justice, helped tenants gain leverage through relentless coordination, rapid legal response, and public messaging—all grounded in the tenants’ demands and leadership.

As tenant organizing grew stronger, the building’s owners retaliated. They removed furniture from common areas, locked card rooms, and tried to discourage community gatherings. Tenants persisted anyway.

“They locked the room where we used to play cards. So we bought our own table and played in front of the door.”

– Marguerite Byrd

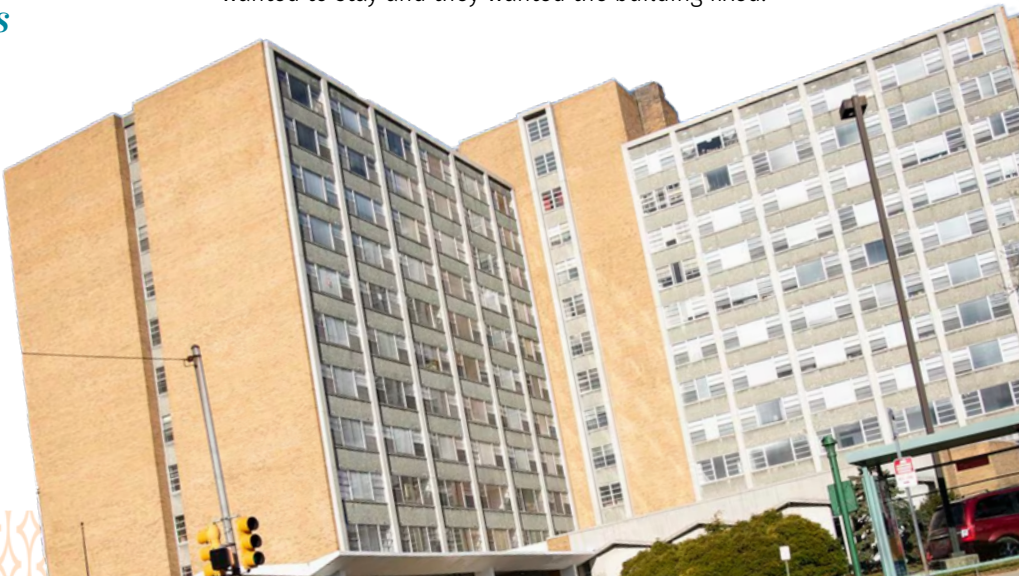
In August 2024, after months of organizing, legal strategy, and public pressure, the Philadelphia Housing Authority agreed to purchase the building. This marked a turning point. For the first time, residents had a real path to safe housing.

Due to hazardous conditions, PHA determined that a full renovation was necessary. It paused rent collection, gave tenants housing vouchers, and began supporting tenants through a relocation process, with a guarantee that every resident would be able to return to their homes once repairs were complete. The Law Center continues to support residents through the relocation process.

“A lot of people are afraid of where they’ll go while we wait. But we deserve to be happy. We do.”

– Marguerite Byrd

Brith Sholom House residents fought for their homes, their safety, and their dignity. They organized, protested, and stood together. And with sustained legal support, they won. What was once a symbol of neglect now represents the power of tenant-led advocacy and the impact of committed legal action.





TIMELINE

# Tenants Take a Stand at Brith Sholom House

From unsafe conditions to a public acquisition, Brith Sholom House residents—many of them low-income seniors—transformed a housing crisis into a powerful campaign for justice and safety. Together with deep legal, strategic, and organizing support from the Public Interest Law Center and our legal partners, tenants’ efforts spanned courtrooms, Council chambers, city agencies, and media outlets.

2019

- Tenants and City discover longstanding issues with fire system and other conditions of disrepair. City sues property owners.
- Residents begin organizing in response to dangerous and deteriorating conditions in the building.
- The landlord requests a conditional rental license despite ongoing code violations—denied in court.
- A judge finds the landlord was illegally collecting rent and calls it “a violation of the law.”

2020

- In January, following the owner’s refusal to comply with the City’s Fire Code, a fire breaks out in the Property.

- The Public Interest Law Center and pro bono co-counsel from Dechert LLP begin representing tenants seeking enforcement of their right to safe housing. Tenants intervene in the City’s enforcement lawsuit.

2022

- Fire Code issues are resolved, but the building soon falls back out of compliance.

2023

- More than 100 new code violations are issued by the Department of Licenses & Inspections.
- The building is declared an unsafe structure and a fire hazard.
- The building is scheduled for sheriff’s sale. On the eve of sheriff’s sale, the owner of the building files for bankruptcy, but the bankruptcy case is dismissed shortly thereafter.

- In November, a judge issues a court order requiring immediate repairs and bars evictions for nonpayment until major safety concerns are addressed.

- A court-appointed receiver takes over building management.

Early 2024

- Residents re-convene the Brith Sholom Tenants’ Council.
- The Law Center, alongside pro bono co-counsel from Hausfeld, staff at SeniorLAW, and tenant organizers at Renters Justice, begins working with tenants to pursue every legal and advocacy option to save the building.
- The receiver restores hot water but leaves many serious hazards unaddressed, including crumbling infrastructure.
- A utility shutoff notice from PGW and a looming sheriff’s sale raises fears of mass eviction.

April 2024

- Tenants hold a protest outside the building ahead of a critical court hearing.
- In court, the receiver declares that the building must be vacated—prompting further action by residents to protect their homes.

May 2024

- Tenants hold a Mother’s Day Rally at City Hall with strong turnout and support from multiple City Councilmembers.
- With legal support from the Law Center and Hausfeld, a PGW shutoff is temporarily delayed after tenants submit medical exemption forms.

June 2024

- Tenants testify before City Council’s Finance Committee during hearings on PGW and the Housing Action Plan, demanding intervention.

- Tenants attend a Philadelphia Housing Authority meeting and demand that PHA intervene to buy the Property. PHA CEO Kelvin Jeramiah later cites this as a crucial moment in his decision to step in to save the property.
- Six Councilmembers, along with a state senator, a state representative, and the Mayor’s Office, tour the building and witness the dangerous conditions.
- The Law Center, Hausfeld, SeniorLAW, and tenants continue to coordinate efforts to prevent utility shutoffs and displacement.

July 2024

- Following a guilty plea to mortgage fraud by one of Brith Sholom’s investors, the Philadelphia Inquirer publishes an expose on the executives who allowed Brith Sholom House to fall into disrepair and their nationwide “empire of neglect,” igniting further outrage across the City.

August 2024

- The court grants a motion to approve the sale of Brith Sholom House, paving the way for public ownership.

September 2024

- The Philadelphia Housing Authority purchases Brith Sholom House.
- Plans are announced to fully renovate the building and support tenants through temporary relocation, with a guaranteed return to safe, upgraded homes.

2025 (Projected)

- Renovations begin. The Law Center continues to support tenants in the relocation process.

MEET THE ORGANIZERS

The Brith Sholom Tenants’ Council

The fight for safe housing at Brith Sholom was led not only by lawyers in the courtroom, but by the residents themselves. Determined to protect their homes and their neighbors, a group of senior tenants came together to form the Brith Sholom Tenants’ Council. Their efforts made the difference.

Made up of residents from across all twelve floors, the council met regularly, shared updates, posted flyers, and coordinated with legal and community allies. When building amenities were taken away in retaliation, they built their own community back—right in front of locked doors.

Diana Dukes • Tenant Leader and Client in the 2020 Case

Dukes stepped forward early in the fight for justice at Brith Sholom House, filing a petition to oppose her landlord’s attempt to collect rent on unsafe, unlicensed housing. A powerful voice for her neighbors, Dukes stood firm in demanding accountability and safe living conditions for all seniors in the building. Dukes is now a member of the Law Center’s Board of Directors.

*“I decided to stand up on behalf of myself and others to let our landlord know that we will not sit idly by and be treated with such callous disregard.”*

Marguerite Byrd • Former President, Brith Sholom Tenants’ Council

A longtime resident, Byrd became a leading voice for tenant rights in the building and at City Hall. She helped organize protests and rallying neighbors, as she remained focused on dignity and community.

*“We made sure we were heard. We deserve to be happy. We do.”*

Steve Kohalmi • Tenant Organizer

Known for his persistence and clear voice, Kohalmi documented unsafe conditions, advocated for legal intervention, and ensured residents’ concerns remained front and center.

*“They weren’t fixing anything. There were rodent and insect infestations—it was really bad.”*

Tenants organized.  
Tenants protested.  
Tenants won.





# Tenants Took a Stand—and Conditions Changed

## COLUMBUS PROPERTY MANAGEMENT FACES ACCOUNTABILITY AFTER YEARS OF NEGLECT

Columbus Property Management is a publicly subsidized nonprofit with a stated mission to provide safe, decent, and affordable housing in Philadelphia. Yet for many tenants, the reality inside their buildings told a much different story.

Across multiple Columbus-managed apartment complexes, residents—many of whom are seniors or people with disabilities—faced years of dangerous and degrading conditions. They reported flooding, mold, pest infestations, collapsed ceilings, broken elevators, and dark, hazardous hallways.

One tenant, Keith Bailey, endured these conditions for years at his building in East Falls. Bailey lives with cerebral palsy and uses forearm crutches, but for nearly four years, he had no safe way to exit his apartment. The hallway outside his door had broken floors and no lighting. Despite repeated repair requests, nothing changed—until the Law Center got involved.

*“People with disabilities shouldn’t be treated like this. Just leaving my apartment put me at risk of hurting myself.”*

– Keith Bailey, Plaintiff



Columbus tenants’ reports of unsafe conditions went unaddressed for years until the Law Center filed suit.

In June 2024, the Law Center, alongside pro bono co-counsel from Holland & Knight, filed a lawsuit on behalf of Bailey and eight other tenants from three Columbus-managed buildings. Their stories revealed a pattern of neglect, failed oversight, and unacceptable living conditions, even as rent continued to be collected.

After the complaint was filed, Columbus entered settlement negotiations. In the fall of 2024, the parties reached a major agreement that required Columbus to inspect all units in its Philadelphia portfolio, complete necessary repairs, overhaul its maintenance and customer service systems, and submit to third-party monitoring for two years. If Columbus fails to meet the terms of the agreement, tenants can return to court to enforce their rights.

*“They only acted when the Law Center showed up with cameras. That’s what it took.”*

– Keith Bailey, Plaintiff

*“Philadelphia renters have the right to safe, healthy, and decent housing.”*

– Caroline Ramsey Re, Staff Attorney

This resolution is a significant win—not just for the nine named plaintiffs, but for thousands of low-income tenants across Philadelphia who deserve better. It is also a clear message to landlords and property managers: public funding comes with public responsibility, and tenants are not powerless.

The Law Center will continue to monitor conditions in Columbus properties and ensure that this legal victory translates into real change on the ground.

## WHAT THE SETTLEMENT REQUIRES FROM COLUMBUS PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

### Full Property Inspections

Columbus must inspect **every unit** in its Philadelphia portfolio to identify health and safety issues.

### Timely Repairs

The company must make **prompt repairs** to address violations uncovered during inspections or reported by tenants.

### Customer Service Overhaul

Columbus is required to **revamp its tenant communication and complaint response system** to ensure issues are handled professionally and without delay.

### Third-Party Monitoring

An independent monitor will oversee compliance for **two years**, ensuring Columbus follows through on its commitments.

### Tenant Enforcement Rights

If Columbus fails to comply, tenants **retain the right to return to court** to enforce the agreement.

## The Philadelphia Inquirer

**Philly tenants reach settlement after suing their property manager over mold, leaks, pests, and more**

On behalf of tenants, the Public Interest Law Center sued Columbus Property Management, which has 34 apartment complexes in Philadelphia and manages about 4,500 apartments across the Mid-Atlantic.



# Fighting for Local Solutions to Gun Violence

## UPDATE: CRAWFORD v. COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

Gun violence has devastated communities across Pennsylvania. In cities like Philadelphia, local officials are almost always blocked from passing sensible gun safety laws that are proven to save lives because of state preemption statutes that prohibit municipalities from regulating the ownership, possession, transfer, or transportation of firearms and ammunition.

In 2020, the Public Interest Law Center and pro bono co-counsel at Hogan Lovells joined with the City of Philadelphia Law Department to challenge these laws in court. The case, *Crawford v. Commonwealth*, was filed on behalf of ten individuals affected by gun violence, along with CeaseFirePA, and the City of Philadelphia.

One of those individuals whom we highlighted in our 2022 annual report is Stanley Crawford, a Philadelphia resident who lost his son, William Aboaje Samir Crawford, to gun violence in 2018. Mr. Crawford is the founder of the Black Male Community Council of Philadelphia and a tireless advocate for peace and safety in his community. He joined the lawsuit to demand local power to address the epidemic that took his son's life.

The lawsuit argued that the preemption laws violate Pennsylvanians' constitutional rights by preventing local governments from protecting their residents.

In November 2024, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court acknowledged the severe impact of gun violence but ruled against our challenge, upholding the preemption laws. While this outcome was disappointing, the case brought critical attention to the cost of legislative inaction and the urgent need for change.

We remain committed to advocating for evidence-based solutions like Permit to Purchase, a policy proven to reduce gun deaths. We are grateful to Mr. Crawford – now a member of our Board of Directors – and all our clients for their courage and determination in the fight to save lives.

### WHAT IS PERMIT TO PURCHASE?

Permit to Purchase laws require individuals to obtain a permit from a law enforcement agency before buying a firearm. This process typically includes a background check, fingerprinting, and in some cases, brief safety training.

Unlike standard background checks conducted at the point of sale, this system creates a more thorough vetting process and a delay between application and purchase. Research has shown that this small waiting period, combined with added oversight, can significantly reduce gun-related deaths.

Permit to Purchase is not a ban on gun ownership. It is a safeguard to help ensure that guns do not fall into the wrong hands and that communities can take steps to protect themselves through responsible, effective policy.

IN CONNECTICUT,  
A PERMIT TO  
PURCHASE  
LAW LED TO A

40%

REDUCTION IN  
FIREARM HOMICIDES.



IN MISSOURI,  
REPEALING A  
SIMILAR LAW WAS  
FOLLOWED BY A

25%

INCREASE IN  
GUN-RELATED MURDERS.



GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

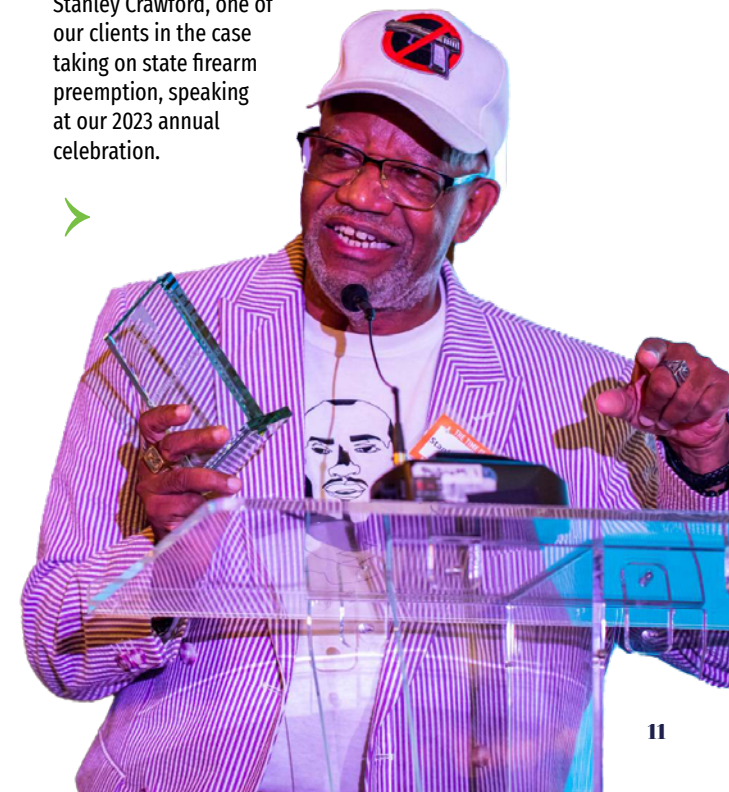
### Pa. Supreme Court to hear arguments over whether Philly can enact its own, stricter gun laws

"This is a novel issue, but that doesn't mean it's not a winnable issue," said Shaundra Kellam Lewis.

By Sammy Calola · September 13, 2023



Stanley Crawford, one of our clients in the case taking on state firearm preemption, speaking at our 2023 annual celebration.





# Partnering with Parents for Education Justice

## LIFT EVERY VOICE LEGAL CLINIC

Families of students with disabilities often face overwhelming barriers when trying to secure the services and support their children need in school. While federal law guarantees every child a free and appropriate public education, many families struggle to navigate outdated information, unclear procedures, and a lack of access to legal guidance.

To help address this gap, the Public Interest Law Center partnered with Lift Every Voice Philly, a Black-led, parent-centered organization that advocates for racial, economic, and education justice in schools. Together, we created a special education legal clinic to support families in some of Philadelphia’s most under-resourced communities.

At the first clinic, 33 families attended a Know-Your-Rights presentation focused on the basics of special education law. Parents learned how to request services, collaborate with schools to create individualized education plans, and what steps to take if their child’s rights were being violated.

Sixteen families also received one-on-one consultations with a special education attorney recruited by the Law Center. These private meetings gave parents the opportunity to ask specific questions about their child’s needs and learn how to advocate more effectively.

This collaboration with Lift Every Voice showed how targeted, community-based legal support can make a difference. By bringing legal expertise directly to families and pairing it with trusted community leadership, we helped equip parents with the tools they need to advocate for their children.

More clinics are planned for 2025. The demand is clear, and the need is urgent. We will continue to work alongside community leaders to ensure that all children, regardless of race or zip code, can access the education they deserve.



Shanée Garner, Executive Director of Lift Every Voice Philly, a Black-led, multi-racial organization building parent power to transform Philly schools by advancing racial, economic, and education justice

“After hearing from our members that so many were struggling just to secure the most basic special education support for their children, we knew we had to do something bold,” said Lift Every Voice Philly executive director Shanée Garner. “The Law Center was the first place we turned to—and the right one. With their leadership, we co-created the city’s first special education legal clinic. We’re proud that our members have had consultations with some of the city’s best lawyers and received a Know Your Rights training—leaving them empowered and equipped to advocate for their children.”

# Shining Light on Cyber Charter Spending

## SPICKA v. COMMONWEALTH CHARTER ACADEMY

Pennsylvania is home to nearly 60,000 students enrolled in cyber charter schools, the highest number in the country. These schools are publicly funded by over \$1 billion in taxpayers’ dollars each year. However, unlike traditional public school districts, cyber charters often operate with limited transparency, making it difficult to see how public funds are being spent.

In 2022, Education Voters of Pennsylvania (Ed Voters), a nonprofit advocacy organization working to strengthen public education, filed a Right to Know request to obtain financial records from the state’s largest cyber charter, Commonwealth Charter Academy (CCA). The request focused on reimbursements the school made to families for student activities and classes that took place outside of regular instruction hours.

When CCA refused to release the records, Ed Voters turned to the courts. The Public Interest Law Center represented Ed Voters in the Dauphin County Court of Common Pleas and won in February 2024. CCA appealed the decision, and we won again in the Commonwealth Court.

In March 2025, the court issued a clear opinion: CCA must disclose the requested financial documents, redacted to protect any personally identifying information. This decision affirmed the public’s right to know how cyber charter schools are using taxpayer funds.

This victory is a major step forward in the push for accountability and transparency in Pennsylvania’s charter school system. Families, taxpayers, and education advocates deserve to understand how public dollars are spent—especially when those dollars are meant to support students.

We are proud to support the work of Ed Voters and will continue advocating for a public education system that is not only well-funded but also transparent and accountable to the communities it serves.



Ed Voters Executive Director Susan Spicka (left) and Law Center Staff Attorney Caroline Ramsey Re.

### CYBER CHARTER FUNDING IN PENNSYLVANIA

- 60,000+ students are enrolled in cyber charter schools statewide.
- Over \$1 billion in public funds go to cyber charters each year.
- State law mandates that school districts pay tuition to cyber charter schools that is based on the cost of educating students in their district buildings even though cyber schools do not provide in-person instruction.
- Pennsylvania’s charter school law has not been meaningfully updated since 1997, despite rapid growth in the sector.
- Cyber charter schools operate with less transparency and accountability than traditional public schools.
- “Taxpayer-funded schools must be transparent and accountable—our children deserve nothing less.”



# A Historic Win, The Road Ahead

## FIGHTING FOR FAIR SCHOOL FUNDING ACROSS PENNSYLVANIA

In February 2023, Pennsylvania’s Commonwealth Court issued a landmark decision: the state’s school funding system was unconstitutional. The court found that students across the state were being denied their right to a “comprehensive, effective, and contemporary public education” based solely on where they lived and how much their communities could raise in local taxes.

The ruling was the result of years of advocacy and a trial that made national headlines. The Public Interest Law Center, alongside the Education Law Center-PA and our pro bono co-counsel O’Melveny & Myers LLP, represented six school districts, three families, and two statewide organizations in the case.

This victory finally forced Pennsylvania’s leaders to reckon with the staggering inequality built into the way public schools are funded.

In response, Governor Josh Shapiro proposed, and a bipartisan group of state legislators passed, a new school funding plan in 2024. It is a significant first step, built around a formula that identified a \$4.5 billion funding gap across the state. This estimate did not even include costs for pre-kindergarten programs or facilities maintenance.

The legislature approved \$494 million in new funding to begin addressing the gap. Though it represents only a fraction of what is needed, this investment has already made a measurable difference for many school districts. With the new funds, districts have extended kindergarten to full days, reopened libraries, added after-school tutoring programs, reduced class sizes in early grades, and more.

However, the proposed nine-year timeline to reach full adequacy is far too slow. A child in first grade today should not have to wait until high school to see the benefits of a fair education system. The Pennsylvania Constitution guarantees all students a meaningful opportunity to learn now—not later.

We will continue to push for a funding system that delivers equity, urgency, and justice for every student in every district.

Public education advocates rallied at the Capitol to encourage lawmakers to provide adequate funding for Pennsylvania schools.

### WHAT FAIR FUNDING LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION

#### URBAN

##### Wilkes-Barre Area School District

The district hired 46 new teachers and staff members to reduce class sizes, particularly in elementary schools.

#### SUBURBAN

##### Pottstown School District

Hired double the number of middle school assistant principals which reduced suspension rates.

#### RURAL

##### Panther Valley School District

Reduced class sizes in grades K–3, allowing for more individualized instruction and classroom support for early learners.

**New investments are already changing students’ lives.**

*“This funding isn’t abstract. It means more teachers, more books, more time to learn, and more opportunities to thrive.”*

- Dan Urevick-Ackelsberg, Senior Attorney





# Protecting the Right to Vote, Ballot by Ballot

## DEFENDING MAIL VOTERS ACROSS PENNSYLVANIA

Voting by mail has become a vital option for many Pennsylvanians. In each election, nearly one-third of the state's voters choose to cast their ballot from home. But too often, paperwork mistakes and inconsistent county policies threaten to silence those votes.

In 2024, the Public Interest Law Center worked alongside partners to protect mail voters from disenfranchisement caused by minor meaningless errors. Our cases spanned counties and courtrooms, but all shared the same goal: to ensure that every eligible vote is counted.

*“Pennsylvania’s Constitution provides powerful protections for the right to vote in fair elections. Over the last 15 years, the Law Center has built an unmatched record in litigating voting rights claims in Pennsylvania’s courts.”*

– Ben Geffen, Senior Attorney

### Genser v. Butler County Board of Elections

After Faith Genser and Frank Matis were notified that their mail ballots would be rejected because they accidentally omitted the inner secrecy envelope, they went to the polls on Election Day to cast a provisional ballot—but the county board of elections refused to count their votes. We joined ACLU-PA and pro bono co-counsel at Dechert in challenging that decision. The Commonwealth Court, and later the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, ruled in our favor, establishing that a voter must be allowed to cast and have counted a provisional ballot when the voter’s mail ballot is disqualified. In June 2025, the United States Supreme Court declined to consider the case, and this precedent now protects voters in all of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties.

### Center for Coalfield Justice v. Washington County Board of Elections

In the April 2024 primary election, the Washington County Board of Elections failed to notify 259 voters of errors on their ballot envelopes, depriving them of any opportunity to fix the problems. Alongside ACLU-PA and Dechert, we argued this violated the voters’ due process rights. The Court of Common Pleas and the Commonwealth Court both agreed with our claims. As a result, voters in Washington County received advance notice of mail ballot errors in the November 2024 election. This case is now on appeal to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

### Black Political Empowerment Project v. Secretary of the Commonwealth

Pennsylvania law requires voters to write the date on the outer envelope of their mail ballot, even though the date is not used to verify eligibility. Counties have frequently rejected ballots when this date is missing or incorrect. Representing nine advocacy organizations alongside ACLU-PA and pro bono co-counsel at Arnold & Porter, we challenged the constitutionality of this practice. In August 2024, the Commonwealth Court ruled in our clients’ favor, but the Pennsylvania Supreme Court later reversed that decision on jurisdictional grounds.

### Baxter v. Philadelphia Board of Elections

Following the Supreme Court’s reversal, we filed a new case in September 2024 after the Philadelphia Board of Elections rejected 69 mail ballots in a special election because of date errors. Once again alongside ACLU-PA and Arnold & Porter, we argued that the rejections violated voters’ constitutional rights. The Commonwealth Court ruled in favor of our clients, and the case is currently pending before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. In the 2024 Presidential election, approximately 18,000 mail ballots had disqualifying errors; only around half of those voters had their votes counted by curing their ballots or casting provisional ballots.

*“Through each of these victories and ongoing battles, the Law Center continues to protect access to the ballot. We remain committed to ensuring that every eligible vote is counted and that Pennsylvania voters can participate in free and equal elections as required by the Pennsylvania Constitution.”*

– Mimi McKenzie, Legal Director

*In the 2024 general election, approximately 18,000 voters across Pennsylvania’s 67 counties submitted mail ballots with disqualifying errors, many in counties that did not provide notice, permit ballot curing, or allow voters to cast provisional ballots. Our cases were filed to protect these voters’ fundamental right to have their votes counted.*





# Protecting Land, Health, and Community Power

## GROWING POWER: GARDEN JUSTICE LEGAL INITIATIVE

Across Philadelphia, residents have transformed neglected lots into vibrant community gardens—growing food, building relationships, and reclaiming land. These green spaces are more than gardens; they are anchors of stability and health in neighborhoods long burdened by disinvestment.

But too many of these community gardens remain legally insecure. Without clear ownership or long-term protections, they are vulnerable to development, displacement, or sheriff’s sale. The Law Center’s Garden Justice Legal Initiative is dedicated to changing that reality. We provide legal support, advocate for policy reform, and help communities organize for long-term land security. In 2024, we deepened this work through strategic victories in law and policy, and by building new collective infrastructure to support lasting change.

We also helped launch the Philadelphia Land Justice Coalition (PLJC), a new alliance of more than 30 organizations committed to preserving community gardens and open spaces. As a legal partner and co-facilitator, the Law Center supports grassroots leadership and shared strategies to secure green space for generations to come.



### New Legal Protections for Community Gardens

Until 2024, Pennsylvania law required gardeners to show 21 years of continuous use to claim land through adverse possession—a nearly impossible standard for many informal green spaces. After years of advocacy, the state adopted a new law that reduces the threshold to 10 years of use in Philadelphia, provided the lot is privately owned, lacks permanent structures, and has been gardened for at least five of those 10 years.

This critical reform reflects what communities have long known: gardens are not temporary fixes. They are deeply rooted neighborhood assets that deserve legal recognition and protection.

The Law Center played a central role in drafting this legislation and working with lawmakers to get it passed.

“This law is a lifeline for community gardens, especially in Black and Brown neighborhoods where gardeners have transformed vacant, neglected lots into vital spaces for food, gathering, and respite. By reducing the time needed to claim ownership, the law recognizes gardeners’ deep investment and helps ensure these gardens can stay rooted in the communities they serve,” said Legal Director Mimi McKenzie.

*The Law Center worked to preserve 39 parcels of greenspace in Philadelphia in 2024.*

**Clearing the Path to Garden Ownership: Reforming the 30-Year Mortgage Barrier**  
Legal ownership alone is not always enough. Even when land is transferred to nonprofit gardens, bureaucratic and financial barriers can undermine long-term security.

Since 2020, the City of Philadelphia had attached 30-year mortgages and notes to land conveyed at nominal cost to nonprofit community gardens. These terms were not required by the city disposition policy and created serious risks. The loans were often “recourse,” meaning nonprofits could be held liable. The conditions for default were unclear, leaving the land vulnerable to foreclosure and nonprofits exposed to legal and financial harm. For example, a garden could be foreclosed upon if it was not “clean and free of debris.” Debris, a possible issue in productive green spaces in the middle of an urban environment, was not defined.

In 2024, the Law Center led a coalition of more than 30 garden and green space organizations to push for change. After sustained advocacy, we successfully negotiated reforms to make the mortgages non-recourse and to include defined default terms and a notice-and-cure provision, allowing gardens to address potential issues before facing legal action or land loss.

**Looking Ahead: A Vision for Land and Environmental Justice**  
Philadelphia’s gardens have always been rooted in community resilience. Yet many still face threats, from land insecurity to unjust development. The Law Center continues to provide direct legal support, community education, and community organizing support to growers, while also fighting for systemic change.

Whether helping gardeners gain legal title, challenging harmful policies, or pushing back against exploitative land use, we believe every neighborhood deserves green space, and the power to grow its future.

## TOP THREATS TO COMMUNITY GARDENS IN PHILADELPHIA Why Legal Protection Matters

**Lack of Land Ownership**  
Many gardens are on privately owned or city-controlled vacant lots without leases or deeds. Without legal control, gardeners can be displaced at any time.

**Tax Delinquency and Sheriff’s Sales**  
If a lot is behind on property taxes, even if gardeners are maintaining it—it can be sold at sheriff’s sale with little notice.

**Outdated Laws and Bureaucracy**  
Before recent reforms, gardeners had to prove 21 years of continuous adverse possession to claim title to land. Legal processes are still lengthy and complex.

**Development Pressure**  
As property values rise, green spaces in under-resourced neighborhoods are increasingly targeted for commercial or residential development.

**Zoning and Code Enforcement**  
Gardens may face fines, forced removal of fencing or structures, or other barriers when they are not recognized in the zoning code.



Senior Attorney Sari Bernstein testifying to Philadelphia City Council members about preserving gardens and greenspace through the Philadelphia Land Bank.

## HOW WE HELP GARDENS SECURE LAND Legal Tools for Environmental Justice

**Adverse Possession Support**  
We represent community gardens through the legal process of claiming ownership of land they have maintained for years. Recent reforms we helped pass have shortened the required use period from 21 to 10 years for eligible lots in Philadelphia.

**Policy Reform and Legislation**  
The Law Center works with coalitions and lawmakers to strengthen legal protections for community gardens through local and state legislation.

**Legal Representation**  
We provide direct legal support when community gardens face ejectment, zoning challenges, or threats from development or sheriff’s sale.

**Deed and Title Research**  
Our team helps gardeners understand who owns the land they cultivate and what legal options are available to secure it.

**Coalition Building**  
As a founding member of the Philadelphia Land Justice Coalition, we connect gardens with advocates, city officials, and legal partners to amplify their voice and power.



The Law Center joins a coalition of gardeners and urban farmers to collectively advocate for policies that permanently secure green spaces in Philadelphia, including our client Norris Square Neighborhood Project’s Las Parcelas garden, pictured here.



# Working Together for Environmental Justice in Southwest Philadelphia

Southwest Philadelphia has long borne the brunt of environmental injustice. From toxic air and industrial zoning to unchecked development and displacement, the community has faced serious health and quality-of-life impacts for generations. The Law Center’s environmental justice work in this neighborhood focuses on supporting residents as they fight for clean air, safe streets, and a real say in how land in their community is used. Whether shutting down nuisance businesses or negotiating long-overdue community benefits from major developers, we work alongside neighbors to protect their health, homes, and future.

### Standing Up to Nuisance Businesses

In Southwest Philadelphia, residents have long dealt with the consequences of illegal and unregulated auto-body shops operating in residential neighborhoods. These shops often bring hazardous waste, noise pollution, and abandoned vehicles—directly impacting health, safety, and quality of life for nearby families.

- Although zoning laws prohibit these operations in residential areas, the city has often failed to enforce them. That’s where the Law Center comes in.
- In 2023, alongside pro bono co-counsel at Hausfeld, we helped neighbors successfully shut down one illegal auto body shop through litigation.
- In 2024, we joined residents again when a second shop tried to open nearby. After neighbors testified at a zoning board hearing and organized public opposition, the owner withdrew the application. Four months later, the business closed entirely.

*“This was about more than noise or traffic. It was about the residents’ right to live in a safe, clean neighborhood.”*

– Sari Bernstein, Senior Attorney

These victories show that with legal support and community advocacy, residents can hold businesses accountable and reclaim their neighborhoods.

The Law Center continues to monitor the area and is working with residents to ensure no new nuisance businesses take root. Every neighborhood deserves clean air, safe streets, and enforcement of the laws that protect them.

### Securing a Community Benefits Commitment

For over a century, the Philadelphia Energy Solutions refinery polluted the air and compromised the health of Southwest Philadelphia residents. After its 2019 explosion and closure, the site was sold to Hilco Redevelopment Partners, which planned to redevelop it into the Bellwether District, a major industrial hub.

Residents feared the new project would bring more truck traffic, environmental burdens, and displacement. When Hilco released a benefits document without community input, local organizations formed the United South/Southwest Coalition for Healthy Communities and retained the Law Center and Earthjustice to fight for a real, enforceable community agreement.

The Law Center helped secure the Coalition’s place in negotiations. After sustained pressure and months of meetings, Hilco released a revised Community Benefits Commitment in October 2024 that addressed community demands on traffic, transparency, financial investment, and enforceability.

This agreement marks a step forward in ensuring that Southwest Philadelphia residents shape the future of their neighborhood—not just endure it.

*“The CBC is a starting point. It leaves the door open for continued advocacy.”*

– Haley Dervinis, Point Breeze Community Development Coalition

The Law Center continues to work with Southwest Philadelphia residents to ensure that their neighborhoods are as healthy and clean as possible.



*“I had real concerns about what this new development would mean for me and my neighbors.”*

– Betty Beaufort, Friends of Queen Memorial Library





## Q&A with Law Center Senior Attorney, Claudia De Palma

# Job Hunting with a Criminal Record



### LEGAL RIGHTS, BARRIERS, AND THE FIGHT FOR FAIR EMPLOYMENT

#### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES PEOPLE WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS FACE WHEN TRYING TO GET A JOB?

One in three working-age adults in the United States has a criminal record. Almost all employers now require background checks as part of the hiring process, and even a decades-old or unrelated conviction can make it significantly harder to get hired. Studies show that a criminal record can reduce employer callbacks by as much as 50 percent. This contributes to a nationwide unemployment rate of over 25 percent for returning citizens, which is more than five times the overall rate.

Beyond hiring bias, people with records also face legal and policy barriers, such as occupational licensing restrictions and laws that ban them from certain jobs, regardless of their skills or rehabilitation.

#### DO JOB SEEKERS WITH RECORDS HAVE ANY LEGAL PROTECTIONS?

Yes. In Pennsylvania, individuals have rights under several local, state, and federal laws. These include Philadelphia's Fair Criminal Record Screening Standards Ordinance (often called "Ban the Box"), the Pennsylvania Criminal History Record Information Act (CHRIA), the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act, and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

These laws require that employers consider criminal records in a fair and individualized way. They also protect a person's right to pursue employment based on their qualifications, not past mistakes.

#### WHAT LEGAL STRATEGIES ARE EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING HIRING DISCRIMINATION?

The Law Center uses litigation, policy advocacy, and public education to combat systemic barriers. We represent clients in lawsuits challenging discriminatory hiring practices and enforce laws that employers often ignore. This year, in partnership with Community Legal Services, we continued litigating *Patterson v. Commonwealth*, a case challenging a state law that permanently bars individuals with most felony convictions from working as security guards.

We also filed an amicus brief in the Third Circuit case *Phath v. Central Transport*, urging the court to interpret CHRIA protections broadly and affirm Pennsylvania's commitment to second chances.

# Together for Justice:

## *Celebrating Community Impact*

Last September, over 340 supporters, advocates, and partners joined us for Together for Justice, our annual celebration of the Law Center's mission and the people who make it possible. Thanks to the generosity of our sponsors and donors, we raised critical funds to fuel our work advancing justice and equity across our region. From powerful speeches to joyful moments, the evening showcased the strength and commitment of our community.



**Congratulations to our Thaddeus Stevens Award honorees Estelle Richman, Saul Ewing, and Renters United Philadelphia!**

Photos by Wide Eyed Studios



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Brendan O'Brien and Alex Walsh Lauren O'Donnell	Robert and Didi Scott Ann Kane Seidman	Mason Austin Mitchell Bach	Karen and David Dolder Gail Donner	Jessica Hilburn-Holmes Andy Hoover	Rebecca Martin James and Deborah Maxwell	Lynne Roberts Mary Catharine Roper	Debra Weiner <i>In Honor of Michael Churchill</i>	Pennsylvania IOLTA Board PhilaChange - Lindy Family		Comcast Consilio	Welsh & Recker
David Perri Deborah Polo	David Shapiro Gary and Trish Sheff	Maureen Barden and David Othmer Katie Barrett Wiik	Dena Ferrara Driscoll Jonah Eaton	Denise Horan Shirlee Howe	Tom May Dennis McAndrews	Daniel and Faye Ross Keith and Silvia Rosenn	Marsha Weinraub <i>In Honor of Brent Landau</i>	University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School <b>\$5,000 - \$9,999</b>		DLA Piper Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation	Digital Evidence Group
Cindy and Larry Rappoport Brian Ratner	Lani Shelton Rachel Sommer	Robert and Didi Scott Ann Kane Seidman	David Shapiro Gary and Trish Sheff	Denise Horan Shirlee Howe	Tom May Dennis McAndrews	Daniel and Faye Ross Keith and Silvia Rosenn	Marsha Weinraub <i>In Honor of Brent Landau</i>	University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School <b>\$5,000 - \$9,999</b>		DLA Piper Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation	Digital Evidence Group
Catherine Reddick	Jeremy Spiegel Heather Steinmiller	Anonymous <i>In Memory of Patrick Temple-West</i>	Patrick Devine Sharon Dietrich	Katherine Harper Debra Harris	<i>In Memory of Lynn Manko</i> Heather Marcus	Priyanka Reyes-Kaura Carl Roberts	Megan Watson Richard Weening	Kessler Topaz Meltzer Check The Mayer-Rothschild Foundation	Yellow Zinnia Fund	Education Law Partners Exelon Business Services Company	Stradley Ronon Swartz Campbell



# Honoring a Legacy, Investing in the Future of Impact Litigation

In late 2024, longtime Law Center supporters Alan Sandals and Alisa Field established the Gilhool-Churchill-Laski Lawyer Professional Development Fund to support the continued growth of our legal staff. This new fund will ensure our attorneys have the resources and training they need to lead groundbreaking civil rights litigation for years to come.

Sandals and Field’s relationship with the Law Center spans decades. In 1978, Field, then working at the national headquarters of United Cerebral Palsy and collaborating with the Law Center, encouraged Sandals to apply for a summer internship with us. He did, launching a relationship that later included service on our Board of Directors from 2013 to 2016. As a law student and new lawyer, Sandals worked on Third Circuit and Supreme Court appeals in the *Pennhurst* case and on enforcement proceedings in the *PARC* right to education case.



Frank Laski joined the Law Center in 1975, helping to develop our education and disability rights work before becoming executive director of the Massachusetts Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee in 1998.



Michael Churchill, who remains a trusted voice as Of Counsel, joined in 1976 and served as chief counsel and co-director for more than 30 years. His litigation shaped the legal landscape in education equity.



The fund’s namesakes, Tom Gilhool, Michael Churchill, and Frank Laski, were early leaders of the Law Center and lifelong mentors and friends to Sandals and Field. Their careers shaped the direction of our advocacy and inspired generations of attorneys.

Tom Gilhool, one of the Law Center’s earliest attorneys, led cases that desegregated Girard College and shut down *Pennhurst*. He also was a founding lawyer at Community Legal Services. Gilhool was internationally known for his work protecting the rights of people with disabilities. He co-led the Law Center with Churchill until 2006 and remained an advisor until his passing in 2020.

“Tom, Michael, and Frank deserve to be recognized for their decades of service to the Philadelphia community and precedent-setting work,” said Sandals. “As a law student and young lawyer, I was fortunate to be mentored by each of them—generous, brilliant advocates who shaped how I think about justice and the role lawyers can play in advancing it. Our hope is that this initiative honoring their great legacy to the Law Center inspires others to join us in supporting the Law Center’s new generation of rights advocates and leaders.”

We are deeply grateful to Alan and Alisa for creating a lasting tribute that honors our past while supporting the future of legal advocacy.

*Interested in making a significant contribution to support our work? Contact Brent Landau for more information.*

## Financials

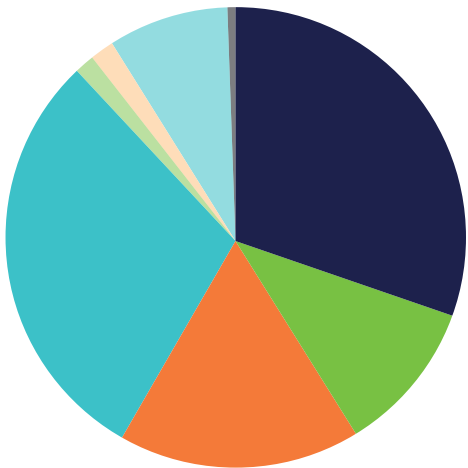
January 1, 2024–December 31, 2024. Figures from audited financial statements.\*

### SUMMARY OF REVENUE & EXPENSES\*

#### REVENUE

Foundation Grants	\$1,013,843
Law Firm & Business Support	\$395,470
Individual Contributions	\$628,368
In-Kind Legal Services	\$1,083,038
Fee Awards	\$47,100
Contracts & Honorarium	\$64,164
Investment Income	\$301,066
Other Income	\$14,888

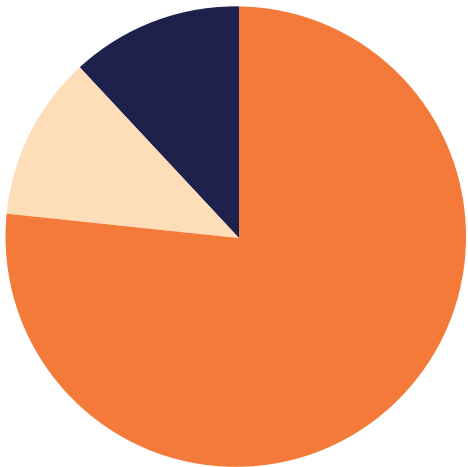
**Total Revenue** **\$3,547,937**



#### EXPENSES

Program Services	\$2,509,943
General & Administrative	\$367,926
Fundraising	\$389,748

**Total Expenses** **\$3,267,617**



### STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

Current Assets	\$1,372,293
Other Assets	\$3,112,502
Total Assets	\$4,484,795
Total Liabilities	\$312,860
Donor Restricted Net Assets	\$1,820,130
Board Designated Net Assets	\$1,455,548
Other Unrestricted Net Assets	\$896,257

\*Audited financial statements are available on our website at [pubintlaw.org/corporate-documents/](http://pubintlaw.org/corporate-documents/)





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**October 9  
2025**

The Public Interest  
Law Center's Annual  
Celebration  
*A Night of Impact*



*Former Senator Bob Casey,  
Our 2025 Thaddeus Stevens  
Award Honoree*

For information on tickets and sponsorship opportunities,  
visit [pubintl.org/events/2025-annual-event](http://pubintl.org/events/2025-annual-event)