

TRANSFORMING PEOPLE'S LIVES

Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles – 2001 Annual Report

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Transformation: People with nowhere else to turn for help come – by the hundreds, every day – to the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. The stories in this report represent just six of the thousands of individuals and families we helped last year in our neighborhood offices, courthouse clinics, and community outreach locations. These portraits from the trenches demonstrate the breadth of our work, and the depth of it too: By solving legal problems LAFLA does more than provide access to justice. Our goal is a transformed human being.



Your support for the frontline law firm for low-income people is more important than ever. Both poverty and inequality have grown in our community to a startling degree. Consider this: during the 1990s, the number of people in the U.S. living below the poverty line increased by about 1.9 million. Of those, nearly 1.1 million were in California. And 480,000 of the increase were people in Los Angeles County. Nearly one-fourth of the increase in poverty in the nation was in our community.

Just as alarming is how the gap between the poor and the well-off is widening. Most of our clients are working, but at low wage jobs that have not allowed them to escape poverty, let alone secure decent housing or obtain medical insurance. The 2000 census revealed that Southern California has the highest percentage of poor families among the nation's metropolitan areas. Not only are the poor poorer, even the middle is poorer. Los Angeles County's median income dropped from \$45,600 in 1990 to \$42,200

OUR MISSION The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles is the frontline law firm for low-income people in Los Angeles. LAFLA is committed to promoting access to justice, strengthening communities, combating discrimination, and effecting systematic change through representation, advocacy and community education. <http://www.lafla.org>

in 2000 when adjusted for inflation. Yet families at the top of the income scale in Southern California had higher incomes than equivalent families in other states. A report by the Federal Reserve Bank in San Francisco in 2000 observed that in the rest of the U.S. during the 1990s income inequality began to level off, but “in California, it continued to grow rapidly.”

This widening societal gap is troubling enough merely as a matter of economics. In his recent book *Wealth and Democracy*, Kevin Phillips argues further that these disparities threaten democracy itself. We in Los Angeles know more about that than we would wish. In 2002 we looked back a decade at the fires of civil unrest in April 1992. Too little, it seems, has changed. Our society is yet to act fully upon the lesson: when those lacking means view the door for redress of grievances as closed to them while open to others, civil peace and community are imperiled.

LAFILA acts everyday to expand access and fairness for those clinging to the frayed end of hope. Our purpose is to transform. In this moment of extraordinary challenge for our nation and our state, the work of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles is needed more urgently than ever. Thank you for your support for the principle of equal justice and our role in pursuing it. It is an investment in a more perfect Union.



BRUCE G. IWASAKI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

LIVES
TRANSFORMED



A PLACE CALLED HOME

California accounted for nearly 70% of all million dollar homes sold in 2000. Yet take a walk around Los Angeles' Pico-Union or Echo Park sections of town, and you'll see wholly different kinds of architecture. On streets like Westmoreland and Columbia, tenants struggle to maintain homes for their children and themselves while dealing with substandard housing conditions and often callous landlords.

The Southern California region, and Los Angeles in particular, are in the midst of a housing crisis. In L.A., where home ownership is 39%, far below the national average, the majority of the City's households are renters. Of that number, nearly half paid more than 35% of their income to keep a roof over their heads. And too often this was for housing with faulty plumbing, slipshod electrical work or crumbling walls.

At the Parkview Apartments near Echo Park, the owner had gone so far as to partially remove exterior walls from the building. Our clients, residents of this apartment building, also had to deal with lead contamination from the removal of old paint, leaking water pipes, and the constant din of construction.

The owner was refurbishing the unoccupied units of the building on a massive scale, while some tenants remained. His aim was to force the tenants out of their rent-controlled dwellings, enabling the owner to charge higher rents to a new set of renters.

With the walls of their home literally crumbling around them, where else could they go for help?

LAFLA senior attorney Tai Glenn, staff attorney Barbara Schultz, and the Environmental Law Foundation, brought suit on behalf of seven families in that building.

As a result of the pressure of the ongoing litigation, a new owner (the building changed hands during this process), paid the seven families \$12,000 each and a refund of rent to move out. One of those families, the Yañezes, was able to use that money to move from an uninhabitable unit and purchase a home of their own.



AN IMMIGRANT'S SAGA

An estimated 4.7 million foreign-born people live in Los Angeles. While the county contains 3% of the nation's population, it received 7% of all U.S. immigrants in 1996, and accounted for 15% of those becoming naturalized citizens.

Fadumo Mohammad is from Kismayu, Somalia. It was there in 1985 that she entered an arranged marriage. Thereafter, her husband abused her physically and psychologically for many years. Then civil war erupted in Somalia in 1991, and the military regime that ruled the country was toppled. Fadumo's brother was killed, and she was raped by armed rebels.

Even when she and her children escaped to a refugee camp in Kenya, her husband continued to torment her. But she always resolved to change her life. With the help of a cousin, Ms. Mohammad fled with her children and sought refuge in the U.S.

But to remain in the U.S. – and avoid a return to possible torture and death – Ms. Mohammad needed help.

LAFLA staff attorney Daliah Setareh represented Fadumo in her political asylum claim. In May 2001, an immigration judge granted Ms. Mohammad and her four sons asylum. A year later, LAFLA's Immigration Unit helped Fadumo and her sons apply for permanent resident status.

Today she and her four boys are living in South Central L.A. She is now the house manager for Refugee Safe Haven, a domestic violence shelter that serves women from African countries. Ms. Mohammad also refers some of those women to LAFLA, and provides translation for the ones being helped by our Legal Assistance for Torture Survivors Program.

"I have my self-respect," she says, "I'm helping people and I feel empowered in my life now."



SAFE REUNION

Police agencies report that there are upwards of 60,000 calls each year in Los Angeles County concerning domestic violence. The actual incidence of domestic abuse is probably higher because many victims cannot or do not know how to find help. Of the approximately 7,000 family law clients LAFLA sees annually, one-third involve domestic violence.

Taquisha Bryant sought help at our Maynard Toll Family Law Clinic, one of four such clinics we operate everyday in different courthouses. The father of her young son and daughter, who hadn't been around in four years, suddenly showed up and forcibly kept the little boy after a visit. This man had once threatened to kill Ms. Bryant. In this latest incident, when our client tried to stop him, he shoved her and fled with the child.

The abduction occurred in Los Angeles, yet the best information about the father's whereabouts suggested he was in Compton, and therefore within the Sheriff's jurisdiction. The case bounced between the two law enforcement agencies, with no action being taken on getting the little boy back.

Caught between indifferent bureaucracies, Ms. Bryant was anxious to find her son.

LAFLA staff attorney Laura Fry prepared motions to obtain sole custody and an order of protection. Ms. Fry, armed with the orders, contacted the district attorney's Child Abduction Unit. The D.A.'s unit recovered Ms. Bryant's son and returned him home the day after last Christmas.

Taquisha Bryant is now living safe and sound somewhere else with her children. And she's attending school with the goal of opening her own business.



OUT OF ISOLATION

Sokunthea Choun is from Cambodia where she was married and immigrated to Los Angeles with her husband in 1996. Unfortunately, her new life here was not one of renewal and hope. It soon became clear that she was in a soulless union, subject to the violent whims of an irrational and vindictive husband. His beatings, including strangling her, taking her money, and threats to have her deported, went on for years.

Finally, in April of 2000, with the aid of a friend from work, Sokunthea escaped to a woman's shelter. Fearing for her child's safety, she returned to the house with the police to get her young daughter. But the husband refused to let their daughter go with her, and because she had no custody orders, the police did nothing to help her.

Ms. Choun was distraught about leaving her daughter with the husband. With her limited command of English, and her husband moving the family repeatedly to ensure her isolation, she wasn't even sure about her immigration status. She went to one attorney for help, but he mishandled her case.

She then came to LAFLA after being referred by the domestic violence shelter. With the help of LAFLA attorney Joann Lee and our Asian Pacific Islander Community Outreach Unit (which has a Cambodian language staffer), our advocates obtained a restraining order against the husband. Because she'd fled her abusive situation, it took multiple hearings to convince the judge to change the custody arrangements.

Sokunthea now has sole custody of her daughter, and her divorce has been finalized. LAFLA also opened an inquiry with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and confirmed her permanent residence immigration status. Ms. Choun is currently attending community college to learn English. She and her daughter, who's begun kindergarten, are building a new life in a different city.

SOKUNTHEA CHOUN LAFLA's broad legal expertise and deep community ties helped Ms. Choun move from victimization to self-sufficiency.



DOING THE RIGHT THING

Reginald Charles is a regular guy who has been a construction worker for more than 15 years. Two years ago the mother of his young daughters Roneisha and Regina was in bad shape due to complications from a car accident. She needed help not only with their two girls, but her two older children as well.

Mr. Charles, like too many others, might have abdicated his responsibility. But he didn't. He stepped up and moved in to look after the mother and the children. Reginald cooked, cleaned, and ironed his girl's dresses for school. And because one of his daughters has juvenile diabetes, he had to learn to check her blood and prepare special meals for her. When the mother died last September, he wanted to keep all four kids together, and did his best to do so.

LAFLA attorney Ana Storey had already begun a paternity action for Reginald when the mother's brother (the girls' uncle) filed a separate paternity action. The uncle, prodded by other family members, obtained ex parte court orders kicking Mr. Charles out of the residence, prohibiting him from being near the children, and denying him any rights of visitation.

Ms. Storey filed a preemptory challenge to have the judge disqualified, not a common occurrence in family court. The matter was transferred to another judge. She argued that the first judge lacked authority to issue any of the kickout and visitation orders because the uncle had no standing to bring the case, and the orders had been issued without any advance notice to Mr. Charles.

When the uncle admitted he had no personal knowledge of any of his unfounded allegations, the court vacated all the orders against LAFLA's client.

Ana then negotiated for the return of the girls to Reginald. She helped him establish paternity, and the sole custody of his daughters, who are now 8 and 6 respectively. And our client is going back to school to obtain his contractor's license.

It has not been easy for Mr. Charles. He says, however: "Being a single parent has completely changed my life, but it's a blessing."

ON THE NICKEL

You won't find it listed in a Thomas Guide street map book, but it exists. Los Angeles' Skid Row is the discomfiting and unwanted neighbor to the adjacent toy, produce and garment districts, and mere blocks from sleek office towers. East Fifth Street is the Nickel, and traverses a 40 square block enclave where upwards of 11,000 men, women and children reside – their lives invisible to many of us.

Victor Ayala's story was like so many others down here. He was a Vietnam-era vet who went through hard times and, drifting from the East Coast to L.A., was sucked into the whirlpool of poverty, drug addiction and eventually homelessness.

But things change. Victor encountered Rick Little, who staffs our Bill Smith Homeless Veterans' Project, headquartered in the Inner City Law Center on Skid Row. Mr. Little obtained Victor's records from the Department of Veterans Affairs. He discovered the VA had incorrectly applied the law in a 1978 decision, and therefore erroneously denied Victor disability benefits he had been entitled to for decades. Our advocate filed a claim to have the case readjudicated under special provisions made available for the homeless. Rick knew that these rules are often ignored by the VA.

Despite the VA's footdragging, Mr. Little kept chipping away at the gray walls of the bureaucracy. In March of this year, after repeated phone calls but no action, Rick gave notice to the VA adjudication specialist that a petition for Writ of Mandamus was being processed requesting the court to compel the VA to adjudicate Mr. Ayala's case, and seek sanctions.

Finally, because of his persistence, Rick got the VA to correct Victor Ayala's disability rating. He received a retroactive check totaling more than \$21,000.

With the money and the help Victor received in overcoming his addiction, he's off Skid Row, living in New York and working.

RICK LITTLE With the assistance of LAFLA paralegal Rick Little of our Bill Smith Homeless Veterans' Project, Vietnam Vet Victor Ayala is off Skid Row and in a job.

LEGAL AID FOUNDATION OF LOS ANGELES
A CALIFORNIA NONPROFIT CORPORATION

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

for the year ended December 31, 2001

ASSETS	2001
Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 2,156,632
Investments	5,356,329
Accounts receivable	8,955
Grants and pledges receivable	275,650
Prepaid expenses	54,004
Property and equipment, net	494,489
Cash held in trust for clients	65,181
Land/securities held for investment	28,407
Total assets	\$ 8,439,647
LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	
Liabilities:	
Accounts payable	\$ 342,502
Accrued expenses	400,527
Accrued vacation	634,536
Refundable advances	1,235,702
Liability to clients for trust funds	65,181
Total liabilities	\$ 2,678,448
Net assets:	
Unrestricted:	
Designated	1,807,013
Investment in property and equipment	494,489
Undesignated	3,301,676
Total unrestricted	5,603,178
Temporarily restricted	149,364
Permanently restricted	8,657
Total net assets	5,761,199
Total liabilities and net assets	\$ 8,439,647

LEGAL AID FOUNDATION OF LOS ANGELES
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STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

for the year ended December 31, 2001

REVENUE AND SUPPORT	2001
Grant revenue	\$ 9,886,431
Annual fund drive contributions	1,223,879
Clinical support	31,039
Attorneys' fees	6,180
Interest earned	282,734
Miscellaneous income	60,223
Contribution – Long Beach merger	214,889
Total revenue and support	\$ 11,705,375
EXPENSES	
Personnel salaries:	
Attorneys	3,234,442
Paralegals	781,654
Clerical and other	2,217,164
Employee benefits	870,674
Payroll taxes	588,714
Space and occupancy	837,667
Equipment rental and maintenance	217,322
Office supplies and expenses	213,048
Telephone	216,940
Travel	45,314
Training	90,937
Library	230,928
Insurance	93,408
Audit	47,567
Litigation	105,206
Service to clients	175,517
Service to program	320,691
Fund-raising expense	492,639
Acquisition of property	96,591
Depreciation	29,710
Other	404,150
Total expenses	\$ 11,310,283
Changes in net assets	395,092
Net assets, beginning of year	5,366,107
Net assets, end of year	\$ 5,761,199

THE PEOPLE WE SERVE
in Metropolitan Los Angeles

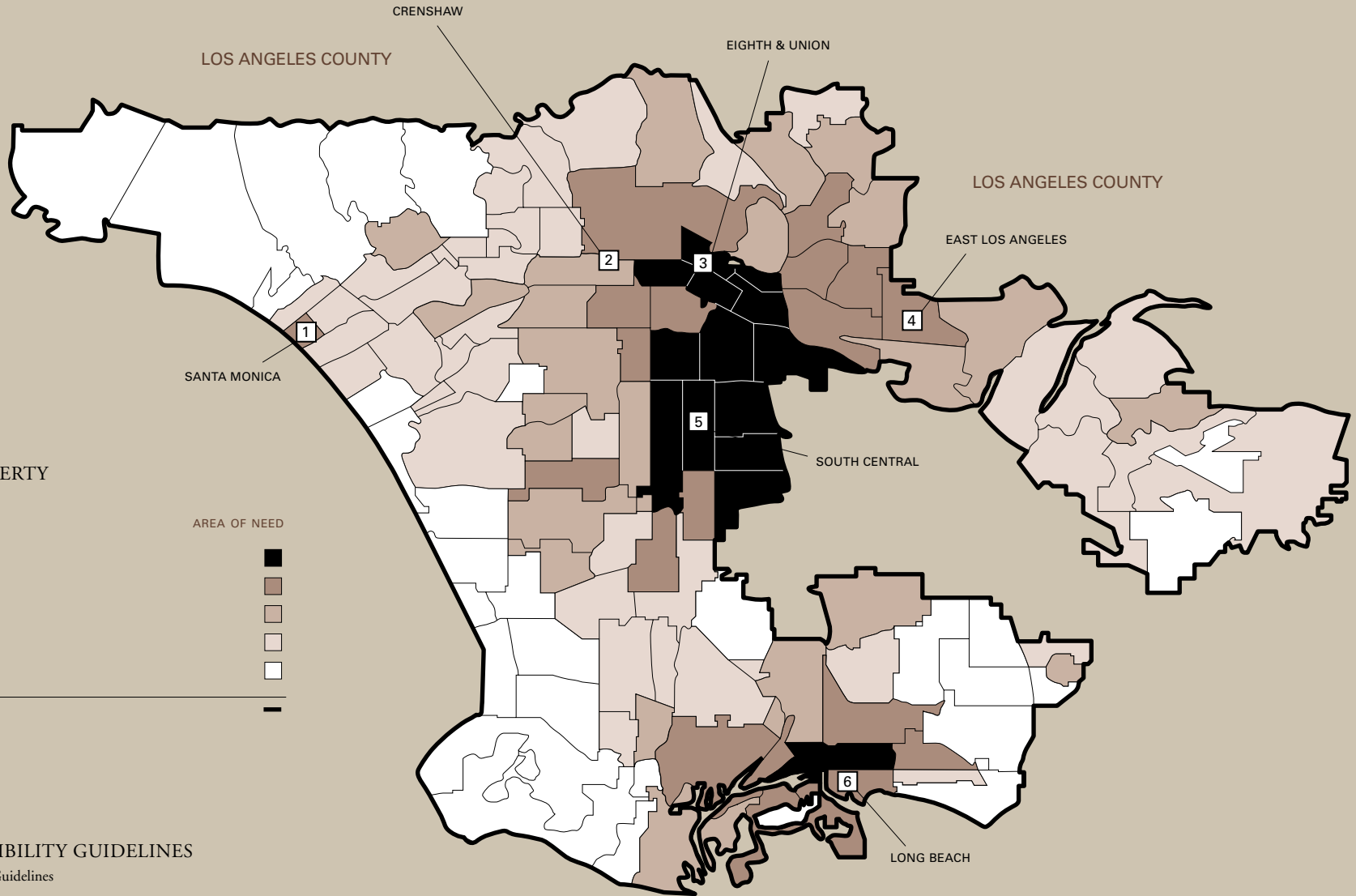
% FAMILIES LIVING IN POVERTY

PERCENTAGE

- More than 36%
- 24-36%
- 15-24%
- 8-15%
- Less than 8%

Metropolitan Los Angeles

AREA OF NEED



2001 CLIENT INCOME ELIGIBILITY GUIDELINES

Legal Services Corporation – 2001 Poverty Guidelines

FAMILY SIZE	YEARLY	MONTHLY
1	\$ 10,738	\$ 895
2	14,513	1,209
3	\$ 18,288	\$ 1,524
4	22,063	1,839

MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD

The year 2001 will be forever etched in our minds for the horrific events that occurred on September 11th. Prior to the terrorist attacks, it was business as usual for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, providing legal services to indigent clients and raising operating support to sustain this important work. In the aftermath of that terrible day, LAFLA – like thousands of non-profits across the country – faced unprecedented and daunting challenges to its service and fundraising efforts. The unfathomable human suffering inflicted on September 11th diverted the attention of the American people from their usual endeavors, channeled charitable contributions to other noble causes, worsened a slumping business climate, and heightened the demand for services by people whose livelihoods were negatively impacted.

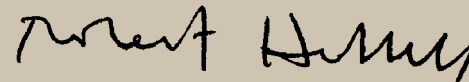
I am pleased to report that despite these challenges, LAFLA succeeded in reaching its annual fundraising goal of \$1.2 million. That we were able to achieve this tremendous result despite extraordinarily difficult circumstances makes us even more indebted to the many friends and supporters — individuals, law firms, corporation and foundations — who partner with us in our mission.

LAFLA's third Access to Justice Dinner, which took place just one month after the devastating tragedy, was a triumph and demonstrated, in the midst of unprecedented national anxiety, strong support for the enduring and unifying American principle of justice for all. About 500 people gathered to honor the presidents of 20th Century Fox Television, Gary Newman and Dana Walden, and the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, Ronald George. The dinner's success was a tribute to the hard work and tireless energy of board members and Dinner Chairs Rita Tuzon and Jim Hornstein, as well as the many generous contributors whose participation we greatly appreciate.

The Annual Fund Drive Law Firm Campaign continued to be LAFLA's primary source of private support. By augmenting the annual operating funds provided by the Legal Services Corporation, the State Bar of California, the City of Los Angeles, the City of Santa Monica, and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, the Annual Fund Drive enables LAFLA to reach many more of the people who rely on us for access to justice. We are indebted to Co-Chairs Jim Clark and Mike Hennigan for their leadership of the Law Firm Campaign and gratefully acknowledge the many law firms, large and small, who gave generously to the campaign. We also wish to thank the many individuals, corporations and foundations whose gifts of time, services and dollars likewise helped further our mission to provide high quality legal assistance, free of charge, to people who need it most and can afford it least.

This annual report tells the stories of six people whose lives were transformed by the efforts of LAFLA's dedicated poverty law advocates. I urge you to visit our website – www.lafla.org – for more information about the ways LAFLA works to provide urgently needed legal services to those with nowhere else to turn.

Although America often fails to achieve its ideal of full and equal justice, it is an ideal worth clinging to and fighting for – particularly in light of the tragic events of last year. Many people play a role in seeking a better system, but few more nobly than those who assist the poor to solve their problems and offer them hope for a better future. We hope we can count on your continued interest and partnership in our efforts in the years to come, and thank you for your support.



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