Breaking Through Ableism

SAFEGUARDING LEGAL RIGHTS FOR THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY

2021 LEGAL AID ANNUAL REPORT
2021 MID-MINNESOTA LEGAL AID BOARD

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DEAR FRIENDS,

Many of you and your families, friends, colleagues, and employers continued in 2021 to navigate the uncertainty that this global pandemic set before you. Still, you found it in your hearts to support the work of MMLA. For that we are extremely grateful. It has been difficult for all of us to manage COVID; it has been and continues to be very difficult for our clients.

An estimated one in four U.S. adults live with some kind of disability. In many contexts ableism — discrimination in favor of able-bodied people — is the standard. Over the past two years, our clients with disabilities have faced additional barriers to health care, safe and stable housing, education, and supports to live independently. In this Annual Report you’ll read in more detail how these barriers have manifested in the lives of real people. You’ll read about ways Legal Aid has supported, advocated for, and advised clients navigating administrative tangles that are annoying for many of us, but become insurmountable for our clients when dealing with multiple agencies, shifting rules, and serious health challenges.

Since COVID-19 entered our lives, Legal Aid has needed to be alert to new situations that arise from the pandemic. Our attorneys have been responding to changes in laws, executive orders, and the unpredictable challenges presented by new variants, school closures, and the eviction off-ramp. We’ve learned to support our clients in a virtual courtroom environment and to shift our own practices and procedures to best meet their needs.

The ability of our staff to constantly pivot during this ever-changing time and provide needed support for every client who comes to our office starts with your partnership. Together, we provide access and strive for justice in the legal system.

Thank you for supporting our work. It’s my hope that you continue to do so.

Danielle Shelton Walczak, Executive Director
Alex Johnson*, a retired police officer and Ford Plant worker, has a spacer in his knee because of a failed surgery. Before the pandemic, he obtained a home modification loan to make his home easily accessible. He installed a ramp and modified the first floor. Despite having reduced mobility, he was able to stay in his home and cover his costs with the help of Consumer Directed Community Supports through Alternative Care (CDCS/AC).

In December of 2019, Johnson was hospitalized after a fall and was discharged to rehabilitation in a nursing home. His initial stay was covered by Medicare and a supplemental policy, but that coverage ran out after a few weeks.

Johnson contacted Legal Aid’s Senior Law Project for help, and Supervising Attorney Gordon Solo took the case. He helped Johnson get on Medical Assistance (MA) so he wouldn’t be immediately discharged from rehab. Solo and the Ombudsman at the facility tried to get Johnson on track for a reparative surgery, but all elective surgeries shut down with the pandemic. When surgeries opened back up months later, the surgeon said the operation was too risky.

“I was getting medical treatment for a bad leg, but I was in there a long time,” Johnson says. “What they were doing for me wasn’t different than what could be done at home. I’d rather be at home, where I’m happier. They wouldn’t let me go.”
“I’d still be in there if I didn’t get a lawyer,” Johnson agrees. “I’d still be sitting up in a nursing home. Gordon kept going, and he wouldn’t give up. I owe a lot to him. He’s quite a lawyer.”

FIGHTING TO LIVE INDEPENDENTLY
The facility assessment said Johnson was too high of a risk to go home. The County wouldn’t reopen his CDCS/AC, and Johnson was stuck in a bureaucratic quagmire in the nursing home.

“The nursing home just basically wrote Alex off at that point,” says Solo. “He was struggling to maintain, and we didn’t want him to lose any more ground. The Ombudsman and I got in their face, and then things changed.”

Solo requested a new CDCS/AC assessment. Johnson was again denied as “risk too high.” Solo appealed the denial. While the appeal was pending, Solo and the Ombudsman convinced the medical staff and the nursing home to increase Johnson’s physical therapy.

“Ax’s primary doctor was really helpful,” Solo says. “He was willing to testify and help in any way he could. The doctor was there in our corner, saying that he supported Alex returning home.”

In the midst of the appeal, the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), taking a new position, informed the county that Johnson was categorically ineligible for CDCS/AC because he was on Medical Assistance. The Human Services Judge said that if Johnson’s condition improved with increased physical therapy, then she would rule on DHS’s position regarding eligibility.

A FAVORABLE DECISION
Johnson’s condition did improve with the increased therapy. A new assessment approved Johnson to return home and the matter was set for a hearing. The judge ruled in Johnson's favor, ordering the county to reinstate the CDCS/AC waiver. Johnson, finally released from the quagmire, was able to return home with the services he needs to live independently.

Solo sent a copy of the judge’s decision to his colleagues who work in senior law. A client who suffered a stroke encountered the same roadblock from DHS when she was ready to return to her home in central Minnesota. Supervising Attorney Karla Krueger in Legal Aid’s St. Cloud office filed an appeal, citing the decision in Mr. Johnson’s case. The St. Cloud client also had her CDCS/AC waiver reinstated and is now living at home again.

SOMEONE IN HIS CORNER
“When DHS weighed in and said he couldn’t go back on the waiver, it looked bad,” Solo says. “We had to push back on that change. When a person is at their most vulnerable and dealing with physical and emotional pain, depression comes along and it can be a spiral down, especially if nobody’s helping you. The administrative details are so complicated, and it can be a lot to handle. You need someone in your corner.”

“I’d still be in there if I didn’t get a lawyer,” Johnson agrees. “I’d still be sitting up in a nursing home. Gordon kept going, and he wouldn’t give up. I owe a lot to him. He’s quite a lawyer.”

*Name changed to protect client identity
Pandemic Heightens Education Discrimination: Tilly’s Story

The COVID-19 pandemic and adjustments to schooling brought new challenges for many students. As schools switched to remote learning, and then back to in-person learning, new policies were developed that had a negative impact on many students with disabilities and their families. Tilly Davis was one of those students.

Tilly, who is now almost eight, has a chromosomal abnormality that brings significant developmental delays and some behavior challenges. One-on-one instruction and time with peers are critical to her progress. Distance learning was very difficult for her, and she lost ground during the months the schools were closed. In addition, her mother works in the critical infrastructure supply chain, and both parents found it impossible to do their jobs and provide the support Tilly and her younger sister needed during the day.

During the summer of 2020, the school district attempted to create a new policy: students who were not able to socially distance could not participate in the summer care program. They said that, in addition, Tilly could not return to in-person school in the fall. The school expressed concern about her need for staff support with eating and toileting, and some of her behaviors that they considered dangerous during the onset of the pandemic. The district suggested a more restrictive environment, but Tilly’s parents didn’t see any academic or behavioral need to change the educational setting where she had been doing well and succeeding before. JoEllen Martinson-Davis, Tilly’s mother, started looking for help.

FIGHTING BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

“I knew in my gut that the quick pace of the pandemic would bring unknown changes in education and further special education discrimination,” she said.

She reached out to various agencies and government representatives for help, and finally called Legal Aid’s Minnesota Disability Law Center (MDLC). MDLC Staff Attorney Joshua Ladd took the case.

“I had seen cases like this before, with schools trying to use disabilities as fear tactics,” says Ladd. “They used Tilly’s disability as a reason to deny access that is required by law.”

Ladd called the school and challenged the new policy, citing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). He also reminded them of the requirement that school districts provide access to afterschool or daycare programs on an equal basis with reasonable accommodations. The school district backed down on some of their position, but not all. Ladd then provided Tilly’s parents with advice to use at their meetings with the school.

“The meetings went well,” Martinson-Davis reported. “I think there had been a number of misunderstandings, or miscommunication between teams on the school’s side. They made some mistakes, which they admitted to and apologized for.”

RETURNING TO SCHOOL WITH EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

Tilly returned to her special education classroom with support for the 2020-2021 school year. She was integrated into mainstream classrooms and made progress in the academic and social skills that were lost in remote schooling. Tilly’s parents continued to negotiate with the school regarding Tilly’s before- and after-school care, plus support during summer vacation and non-school days. Ladd provided legal advice for the negotiations.

“The tension we experienced at the beginning, and the lack of understanding about the laws around discrimination felt so heavy and huge; it was affecting everything,” Martinson-Davis said. “Getting to a new center of truth was important, and the school acknowledging their mistakes helped clear the air a bit.”
Legal support enabled Tilly’s parents to effectively advocate for her with the school district, knowing they had backup if they needed it. Ladd and MDLC provided support throughout the process.

Tilly is now attending school, progressing as needed, and receives adequate support in her before- and after-school care when her parents are working.

“My stress level dropped tenfold when Joshua entered the discussion,” Martinson-Davis says. “He understands broad strokes and nuances of discrimination law. We are so relieved and thankful to Legal Aid for help, preparation, and encouragement. We are lucky to have had Joshua on our team.”

“I knew in my gut that the quick pace of the pandemic would bring unknown changes in education and further special education discrimination,” Martinson-Davis said.
Self-Advocate Fights for Supports to Finish College

James Lee is a baseball player and an Augsburg University student. He has been working toward a bachelor of science in physical education, and his goal is to eventually teach at a small-town elementary school in central or northern Minnesota. Lee has autism, ADHD, and dyslexia.

PREPARING FOR SUCCESS

Lee quickly found resources to help him reach his goals at Augsburg University. With medical documentation of his disabilities, he met the qualifications for accommodations for classes. He was given an adviser to set up accommodations, and he checked in once a week for ongoing support. He has worked closely with Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) and the disability services at school throughout his education.

“VRS has helped me with a lot of things,” Lee says. “I always knew finances would be part of my struggle. Some things they wouldn’t cover, even though I was eligible for financial help. That’s when I reached out to a lawyer.”
Anne Robertson is a Staff Attorney with Legal Aid’s Minnesota Disability Law Center (MDLC). She worked with Lee several years ago, asking the agency to cover tuition at Augsburg, which is a private university. She argued that Lee couldn’t attend a state university for his chosen degree because he wouldn’t have the needed disability supports to help him succeed. VRS agreed to the requested variance and paid a higher percentage of tuition than their policy usually allows, opening the door for Lee to pursue his goals at Augsburg.

“My lawyer was amazing,” Lee says. “She was always on top of things, and she knew what she was doing. Once MDLC was involved, VRS agreed to cover everything with financial criteria based on my mom’s income.”

NEW CHALLENGES WITH COVID-19
When COVID-19 hit, Lee faced new challenges. He moved out of the dormitory and back in with his mother to save money and stay close to his support system. His move from the dorm prompted VRS to change their assessment of benefits, and they shifted the amount Lee would have to contribute. The difference came to thousands of dollars for his final semester. Lee would have to drop out of school or get a job, which he could not do while keeping up with his studies and student teaching. Just when the accomplishment of a degree was so close, the change created an impossible situation.

“For students with disabilities, those disabilities affect every area of their life,” Robertson says. “James made particularly good use of the resources available to him. But every step of the way, he had to maintain a whole support structure in place so he could succeed and move on to each new level. There are so many rules about what you can and can’t do. If someone using disability services makes a wrong move, they can be cut off or might owe thousands of dollars in an overpayment.”

SECURING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE
Robertson contacted VRS and presented legal and practical arguments to grant another variance. Given that VRS had already invested so much in helping Lee achieve his career goals and become financially independent, it made no sense to pull support when he was so close to his degree. Within 24 hours of Robertson filing the request, VRS granted an exception to the policy. They agreed to pay Lee’s tuition at the same rate as they had for the last several years.

“Disability narrows options, expectations, and opportunities,” says Robertson. “Folks are navigating every minute of every day things the rest of us take for granted. I was impressed with the disability services at Augsburg and with James’ determination in marshalling his resources. He’s very self-motivated, he has a vision, and he has a comprehensive plan. He has worked throughout his college years to keep all parts of that plan in place and move things along.”

Lee is now finishing his final semester at Augsburg. He is student teaching and moving toward certification to teach elementary school physical education. He hopes to start teaching in the Twin Cities and then move north.

“I’m looking forward to the challenges ahead,” says Lee.
Persistence Pays off for Family Seeking Disability Benefits

AJ was born in Texas with spina bifida and a number of other health issues. His grandmother, Alfreida Connell, brought him to Minnesota soon after his birth in 2016. After multiple surgeries, he still wears braces on his legs. He has marked limitations in moving and manipulating objects, and, at the age of three, he was making little progress in speech therapy.

Connell has had full custody since AJ’s early infancy. She applied for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for AJ in 2017. The application was denied because the Social Security Administration found AJ ineligible for disability benefits. Connell applied again and was again denied.

ROADBLOCKS AT EVERY TURN
“I kept getting denied, and it’s so hard to deal with a kid with disabilities when you don’t get help,” Connell says. “It’s so, so stressful. You have to figure out everything and deal with this and that. I didn’t know which way to go, and I was getting doors slammed in my face. My friend told me to try Legal Aid.”

Staff Attorney Lars Markeson took AJ’s case in January of 2018. By that time, AJ was old enough for autism testing. Markeson submitted all of AJ’s past medical records and asked the administrative law judge (ALJ) to leave the record open until results from the autism test were available. The ALJ did not wait for the results and issued another denial, based on a review from a medical examiner who never actually met AJ.

“AJ has multiple disabilities, but Social Security’s expert says he’s not disabled,” says Markeson. “They focused on the fact that he had some surgeries as if now everything is fine — but it’s not fine.”

A SLOW PROCESS
Markeson appealed the case to the Appeals Council in Virginia, Minnesota. The appeals process is very slow, and meanwhile, Connell was struggling financially. The test results diagnosed AJ with expressive speech delay, gross motor delay, and autism/global development delay. He was still not speaking beyond a few words and caring for him was a full-time job.

“Even without a denial and appeal, the application process is slow,” Markeson says. “Families are overwhelmed, and the Social Security workers are often not helpful. What can a parent do when they need to stop working to manage their child’s disabilities? Something like autism doesn’t show up as ‘proof’ until the child is two or three years old. Social Security expects proof.”

Markeson discussed options with Connell. She could continue to wait for an answer from the appeals court or start the process over again with a new application. Persistence isn’t the best option for every client, and Markeson acknowledges that. He continued to discuss options with Connell and follow her lead.

Eleven months after Markeson filed the appeal, the Appeals Court remanded the decision to a local judge, who has a record of awarding disability in about 25% of the cases she hears. Markeson was certain that the record — now with the autism test results — clearly showed that AJ qualified for benefits.

“This was my first time dealing with all of this, and I was nervous about talking to the judge,” Connell says. “But Lars broke everything down for me. He told me to go in and explain what was going on. That’s what I did, and it went fine after that.”
The local judge approved AJ for disability benefits in April of 2021. The decision included payments retroactive to Connell’s first filing in 2017, so Connell has a bit of financial security and can better consider the education and care options available for AJ.

“Without Legal Aid, it would’ve been hopeless,” she says. “Legal Aid was a blessing. Many times I wanted to quit, but Lars hung in there with me. He said, we’re going to hang in there and get it done. And we did.”
David Roberts* lives in a trailer in rural Minnesota. His friend Joann asked to stay in his home for a week before she went into treatment in early 2020. Roberts is four years sober and wanted to support her recovery, so he agreed that she could stay as long as she didn’t drink.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic shut everything down — including the treatment center. Like many others who opened their homes for various reasons in early 2020, Roberts became an unintentional landlord.

SHUT IN TOGETHER
Roberts is 70 years old and walks with a cane. He has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), neuropathy in his feet, and chronic back pain. When Joann started drinking, he didn’t catch it at first. She drank at night, after he went to sleep. Once he realized she was drinking, he told her she had to go. She refused, insisting the trailer was half hers.

“I thought she’d just be here for a week,” says Roberts. “But the pandemic hit and I was
stuck with her for over a year. I spent most of it walking on eggshells.”

Joann became increasingly violent. She went into rages, yelling at Roberts and threatening him. She would block the doorway so he couldn’t leave the room. Roberts received some services from the county to help him live independently, but the county staff didn’t feel safe with Joann there. The acrimony in the household was too much, and they stopped coming.

“I couldn’t protect myself from her,” Roberts says. “She would yell at the top of her lungs, and I was scared. I’d walk away, and she’d come busting in and stand in my way.”

One night, Joann got drunk at a friend’s house. She talked about suicide, and her friend called an ambulance. She was admitted to the hospital, and Roberts saw his chance to get her out of his home. He talked to a caseworker, who referred him to Legal Aid.

PETITIONING FOR A RESTRAINING ORDER

“David has a lot of disabilities, and he started out trying to help someone else,” says Karla Krueger, Supervising Attorney in the St. Cloud office. “He was in a really difficult spot when he came to us. He was so depressed by the situation it was threatening his sobriety.”

Krueger helped Roberts look at his options. They decided to petition the court for a Harassment Restraining Order (HRO) against Joann. Joann didn’t want an HRO on her record, and she wanted to store her stuff in Roberts’ trailer while she was in long-term treatment. She asked for a hearing.

“I couldn’t get Joann out by myself,” says Roberts. “It was good to have a lawyer, and I’m low-income, so it’s great that she could help me for free.”

Krueger worked with Roberts to document the facts and prepare for the hearing. Roberts has some memory issues, so the preparation was important. Roberts’ sister testified, and they also had testimony about the hostile environment from the county workers. The judge granted the HRO.

“Without a lawyer, I wouldn’t have known what to do,” Roberts says. “The whole thing was devastating and frustrating and it’s fortunate she got out when she did because I was almost to the point of having to drink myself. And if I drink, in two weeks I’ll be dead.”

STAYING SAFE AT HOME

Krueger has seen a number of unintentional landlord cases over the past year. People with disabilities are especially vulnerable to financial exploitation and physical abuse from people living in the same home with them.

“It’s really tough for people to handle these situations,” Krueger says. “It can be hard for them to ask for help, or even to know who to call. I appreciate being able to help them through it.”

Joann is now in long-term treatment, and Roberts’ home has settled back to normal. The neighbors all know that if Joann shows up in the neighborhood, they should call the police.

“Karla explained things so I could understand,” says Roberts. “She told me what I needed to do and I followed her suggestions. She made me feel comfortable. She took me step by step through it all, including talking to the judge, and everything turned out good.”

*Name changed to protect client identity
Racism Creates Barriers to Housing Rights

Trina Murray, who has a Section 8 voucher, applied for a two-bedroom apartment to accommodate a live-in Personal Care Assistant (PCA). It should have been simple. Murray has a number of health concerns, including fibromyalgia and diabetes. She has bilateral bone disease in both knees and needs surgery. She has a note from her doctor documenting her need for a live-in PCA. But the Housing & Redevelopment Authority (HRA) worker refused her request.

“That lady was so mean to me and unprofessional,” Murray says. “It was like she was attacking me, being condescending, asking for details of my medical diagnosis. I don’t need to disclose my medical history, and they don’t have a right to ask me.”

APPEALING TO HOUSING AUTHORITIES IN VAIN
The worker would not tell Murray why she was being denied. Murray is a former social services worker, so she knew the steps to take. She researched the HRA policy and documented her correspondence. She appealed the denial and requested a reasonable accommodation.

Despite Murray’s background, knowledge, and research, she could not get anywhere. The HRA workers did not seem to see her as a person with legitimate health needs that required extra assistance.

“Who are these programs for, if not for someone like Ms. Murray?” says Staff Attorney Alex Kane. “Even without the surgery, she met the criteria for a person who needs a live-in PCA. They seemed to think she was trying to exploit the surgery as an opportunity to get a two-bedroom, but this person is exactly who the social services have been created for.”

Murray had struggled with the same HRA worker previously when she wanted to add a foster child to her voucher. She was told that if she didn’t stop complaining, she would lose her voucher.

AN ISSUE OF RACISM
“I saw how the worker talked to me versus the way she talked to my neighbor who happens to be Caucasian,” says Murray, who has seen various ways that race plays into credibility when dealing with agencies and institutions. “The relationship was different. I do say race has something to do with it, and people don’t always want to talk about that.”

Things changed quickly when Kane stepped into the situation. The HRA workers were courteous and respectful. They explained there was a “high threshold” for proving the need for a live-in PCA and said that if he could demonstrate the need, they would be amenable to looking at the case.

“The greatest difficulty Ms. Murray had was in communicating with these people,” Kane says. “Where was the disconnect? I didn’t do that much. I just connected the dots that should have been connected very easily.”

Kane requested a more detailed letter from Murray’s doctor and sent it to the HRA. The HRA then approved a two-bedroom apartment to accommodate a live-in PCA.

LISTENING TO THE WHOLE STORY
“When I called Legal Aid, they responded right away and listened to my whole story, not just part of it,” says Murray. “They educated me on each step, but the ultimate decisions were mine. I said I felt like I was being discriminated against and treated unfairly and that my rights were being violated. Even when the HRA told me I was wrong, Alex let me know I was right to stand up for myself. I felt like the weight of the world was off my shoulders. Legal Aid helped me stay in my community, and I thank them for that.”

Murray also had a concern that she had been paying too much rent based on her income and Section 8 guidelines. Kane followed up and found that Murray was correct. She is now paying the appropriate amount, living in a two-bedroom apartment with a PCA, and preparing for her surgeries.
“When I called Legal Aid, they responded right away and listened to my whole story,” says Murray. “...I felt like the weight of the world was off my shoulders. Legal Aid helped me stay in my community, and I thank them for that.”

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

“One thing I’ll say to people who are disabled or of color or immigrant status, or who don’t have a whole lot of education: You do have rights and you have to fight for them,” Murray says. “If you know the sky is blue, stand on it. You have to do your own research and advocate for yourself to the best of your ability. Then, when you reach out to someone like Alex, you can give them evidence and facts to work with to help you reach your goal.”
Maryan Ahmed is a single mother with five children. One son has asthma. After a bout of COVID-19, Ahmed and her son developed long-term sensitivities to smoke. Although they lived in a non-smoking building, lingering smoke in the elevators, hallways, and in their apartment made it unlivable.

“I couldn’t even eat,” says Ahmed. “Every night, it was so bad in our rooms that we slept in the living room and closed the doors. I told the landlord what was happening, and they said there’s nothing they could do. I told them we could not keep living there, and they didn’t even take me seriously.”

UNACCEPTABLE REMEDY
They told Ahmed that if she wanted to move, she would have to break her lease, give two months’ notice, and pay a fee of $3,000. That was completely out of reach for her, so she reached out to Legal Aid.
“They said they’d send a person to help me,” Ahmed says. “I was hoping and wishing to get a nice person who would understand me and would help me understand, carefully and clearly. Rebecca, the attorney, was amazing, and told me how to do everything to move from that place.”

**LEGAL INTERVENTION**

Staff Attorney Rebecca Stillman sent the landlord’s attorney a letter, asking for the lease to be terminated early as a reasonable accommodation because of the health effects that the smoke in the building were having on Ms. Ahmed and her children. After some back and forth, the landlord gave permission for Ahmed to vacate the property early without a break-lease fee.

“Things changed so fast when I got a lawyer,” Ahmed says. “When I went to their office — well, if you wear a hijab, they don’t even give you time to talk. I told them, that’s not how you talk to people, you need to treat everyone the same. My cousin lives there and had the same trouble with them. But once the lawyer talked to them, they said, okay, you can move.”

This was Stillman’s first case that was explicitly COVID-generated. In this case, long-term COVID complications dictated a change to Ahmed’s living situation. It was no longer possible for her or her children to live in a place that was previously acceptable.

**HEALTH CRISIS BEYOND THE HEADLINES**

“When we think of how COVID affects housing, we think about the eviction moratorium,” Stillman says. “But we’re just starting to see other effects on people’s housing stability in ways we didn’t anticipate. Safe and stable housing is critical for health and well-being. This case is a perfect example of the public health effects of COVID that extend beyond the case rate and death statistics we see in the news.”

Ahmed and her children have moved. “Now we live in a nice, safe place,” she says. “My kids and I are so happy to live here. Thank God Legal Aid was there for me.”
BERNARD P. BECKER LAW STUDENT VOLUNTEER AWARD
The Bernard P. Becker Law Student Volunteer Award is presented to a law student who has demonstrated a commitment to the provision of legal services to low-income and disadvantaged persons. This year’s award recognizes Ashley Meeder, a 3L at the University of Minnesota Law School. Meeder performed over 400 hours of full-time service with MMLA’s Minneapolis housing unit as a Minnesota Justice Foundation law clerk during the summer of 2020 and volunteered over 200 additional hours.

Meeder advocated for low-income tenants in eviction proceedings. She drafted rent escrow affidavits demanding repairs and rent abatement, and motions to expunge tenants’ past eviction records. She provided direct client representation in one case, identifying defects in the landlord’s case, drafting the motion, and preparing oral arguments. Her efforts allowed MMLA to successfully resolve the case and allowed the client to keep her housing.

“In her time with Legal Aid, Ashley welcomed all assignments,” says her supervisor, Staff Attorney Evan Gelles. “She asked thoughtful questions to dig into complex legal issues and produced high-quality writing. Ashley coupled the skills she learned during law school with her unique blend of compassion and critical thinking. The result is an incredible advocate who helped our clients stay safely housed during a global pandemic.”

BERNARD P. BECKER “EMERGING LEADER” AWARD
J. Singleton, Program Manager of Legal Services State Support, a project of the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, is the recipient of the 2021 Emerging Leader Award. Emerging Leaders are attorneys with up to 10 years of cumulative legal aid service and a record of outstanding service and/or extraordinary accomplishments in the field.

Singleton, who began her career at State Support as the Legal Technology Projects Manager, is an outstanding technology innovator in addition to being an excellent attorney. Her leadership and tech skills contributed to the development of the Legal Organizations Online Network (LOON), and the redesign of LawHelpMN.org. Singleton led State Support through the transition to work from home, and as the need for on-line resources exploded, she coordinated the work of outside contractors to create 300 document translations and 10 new videos for the LawHelpMN site. She strengthens partnerships with community groups and keeps projects moving forward, tracking outcomes through the pandemic.

“J. is a calm, organized, and dedicated leader,” says Deputy Director Lisa Cohen. “She’s also a self-starter who readily takes on new challenges. She has always stepped in where State Support needs her most, finding innovative ways to best serve legal aid clients throughout Minnesota. She willingly accepts increasing responsibility, constantly learning and growing as a leader.”

MINNESOTA LAWYER’S ATTORNEYS OF THE YEAR
A team of three Legal Aid attorneys (Staff Attorneys Rebecca Stillman and Anne Robertson and Litigation Director Justin Perl) and two Assistant U.S. Attorneys (Ann Bildstein and Bahram Samie) were selected for Minnesota Lawyer’s Attorneys of the Year.
an investigation and filed an action. The landlord and other defendants entered a consent decree (settlement without admission of guilt) that applies to 30 defendant-owned properties and future properties they acquire. The landlord is out of the property management business. He is prohibited from any property management responsibilities or ever entering his properties again. Defendants are required to hire an independent property manager and to pay $736,000 to the victims of the landlord, plus a $13,000 civil penalty and $140,000 in attorney fees to Legal Aid.

“We are incredibly proud of our team for their success in this case,” says Deputy Director Micaela Schuneman. “The positive outcome shows the power of forming a trusting relationship with clients and listening to their concerns. The team was dedicated in their pursuit of a just result for the clients and the broader renter community. The team truly earned and deserves the honor of being recognized as Attorneys of the Year.”

**THE ARC MINNESOTA’S MISSION LEADER OF THE YEAR, ORGANIZATION**

The Legal Services Advocacy Project (LSAP), the legislative advocacy branch of MMLA, was presented with The Arc Minnesota’s Mission Leader of the Year Award for an organization. This award focuses on an organization that makes a difference for individuals with disabilities and their families through work in public policy, legal, or systems change arenas.

“LSAP team members – most notably, Staff Attorney Maren Hulden – have been critical allies in advancing our mission through legislative advocacy,” says The Arc Minnesota’s Chief Program Officer Alicia Munson. “Shared legislative priorities in 2021 included systems transformation, recovery education, inclusive childcare, and more. None of these would have passed without Maren’s meaningful partnership, effective lobbying, and tireless advocacy.”

“We are proud to work with The Arc Minnesota,” says Supervising Attorney Ron Elwood. “We learn so much from them about advancing human rights and disability justice and centering the lived experience of people who have disabilities. Maren brings a wealth of experience and expertise to her work along with a strong collaborative ethic. She aligned closely with our disability advocacy partners to strengthen Legal Aid and LSAP’s work at the Capitol, advocating for pressing policy changes that will have a positive impact on children and adults who have disabilities across Minnesota.”

**Rebecca Stillman**

The team secured justice for 23 women by putting an end to their landlord’s discriminatory and predatory sexual harassment practices over many years. The landlord created a severe and pervasive environment of sexual harassment for female tenants and single African American women in particular. Harassment included repeated propositions, unwanted touch, and inappropriate comments, questions, and requests. He claimed fictitious charges such as higher rent or late fees and told the tenants they could “work it out” by providing sexual favors. Those who did not “work it out” faced additional fees or eviction. To stop these practices, the Legal Aid team filed suit for violating the Fair Housing Act and their clients’ civil rights.

Through a tenacious discovery process, Legal Aid discovered more victims and turned their cases over to the Department of Justice. The DOJ opened an investigation and filed an action. The landlord and other defendants entered a consent decree (settlement without admission of guilt) that applies to 30 defendant-owned properties and future properties they acquire. The landlord is out of the property management business. He is prohibited from any property management responsibilities or ever entering his properties again. Defendants are required to hire an independent property manager and to pay $736,000 to the victims of the landlord, plus a $13,000 civil penalty and $140,000 in attorney fees to Legal Aid.

**Anne Robertson**

“We are incredibly proud of our team for their success in this case,” says Deputy Director Micaela Schuneman. “The positive outcome shows the power of forming a trusting relationship with clients and listening to their concerns. The team was dedicated in their pursuit of a just result for the clients and the broader renter community. The team truly earned and deserves the honor of being recognized as Attorneys of the Year.”

**Justin Perl**

“The team was dedicated in their pursuit of a just result for the clients and the broader renter community. The team truly earned and deserves the honor of being recognized as Attorneys of the Year.”
**FINANCIALS**

**REVENUE & EXPENDITURES | 2021**

**REVENUE**
- United Ways: $243,570
- Federal: $4,686,285
- State: $5,475,596
- Foundations: $2,425,713
- Local Government: $1,201,404
- Fund for Legal Aid: $1,579,000
- Legal Services Advisory Committee (LSAC): $1,658,650
- State Support and LSAP: $457,473
- Attorney Fees: $243,355
- Miscellaneous: $928,817
- **TOTAL**: $18,899,863

**EXPENDITURES**
- Poverty Law: $11,072,065
- Disability Law: $2,644,924
- Administration: $1,848,092
- Legal Services Advocacy Program (LSAP): $553,060
- State Support: $1,802,272
- Fundraising: $491,265
- **TOTAL**: $18,411,678

**ASSETS**

**CURRENT ASSETS**
- Cash and Cash Equivalents: $5,166,715
- Client Escrow Funds: $222,104
- Receivables:
  - Grants and Contracts: $2,117,126
  - Pledges and Other: $208,453
- Prepaid Expenses: $63,475
- **TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS**: $7,777,873

**PROPERTY AND EQUIPMENT, at cost**: $2,252,112
Less Accumulated Depreciation: $756,080
**TOTAL PROPERTY AND EQUIPMENT (NET)**: $1,496,032

**OTHER LONG-TERM ASSETS**
- Funds Held by Community Foundation: $3,740,375
- Grants and Contracts Receivable: $105,501
- **TOTAL OTHER LONG-TERM ASSETS**: $3,845,876

**LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS**

**CURRENT LIABILITIES**
- Accounts Payable: $862,482
- Client Trust Deposits: $222,100
- Accrued Expenses: $520,025
- Grant Advances: $0
- **TOTAL CURRENT LIABILITIES**: $1,604,607

**NET ASSETS**
- Net assets without donor restrictions: $7,532,536
- Net assets with donor restrictions: $3,982,638
- **TOTAL NET ASSETS**: $11,515,174

**CONSOLIDATED BALANCE SHEETS | 12.31.21**

**REVENUE**
- Court Awarded Attorney Fees: 1.3%
- Miscellaneous: 4.9%
- State Support & LSAP: 2.4%
- LSAC: 8.8%
- Fund for Legal Aid: 8.4%
- Foundations: 12.8%
- United Ways: 1.3%
- State: 28.9%
- Federal: 24.8%
- Local: 6.4%

**EXPENDITURES**
- Poverty Law: 60.1%
- Disability Law: 14.4%
- LSAP: 3.0%
- State Support: 9.8%
- Administration: 10.0%
- Fundraising: 2.7%
- **TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS**: $13,119,781
YOU CAN HELP EXPAND OUR REACH

The number of Minnesotans seeking legal assistance continues to rise. Your support — whether through sharing your time or making a monetary donation — makes it possible for us to meet increasing demands and provide much needed assistance for Minnesotans struggling to meet their basic needs. When you contribute to Legal Aid, you contribute to a stronger community. You remove barriers and make justice possible. You change lives for the better.

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mhugdahl@mylegalaid.org
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7,550 cases closed

Disability Law 12.0%
Economic stability 24.1%
Keeping families safe 12.8%
Preventing homelessness 23.8%
Keeping kids in school 1.6%
Protecting consumers 4.7%
Other 4.2%
Tax law 4.9%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Law</th>
<th>Cases Closed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disability Law</td>
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<td>Tax law</td>
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We are especially grateful to the eleven generous Associates' Campaign Champions and fifty-two Emerging Leaders, who collectively accounted more than a third of the Campaign total.

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Rinke Noonan

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MMLA attorneys provide legal advice and brief services to many of our clients.

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Erik Ordahl
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### BY THE NUMBERS

**CASES CLOSED | AGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Cases</th>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;5</td>
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<td>5-18</td>
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<td>19-59</td>
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<td>60-64</td>
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<td>65+</td>
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</table>

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Pablo Orozco
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Kirsten Pagel
Jim Paletz Family
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MORE THAN

14%
OF MMLA CLIENTS WERE NOT ENGLISH SPEAKERS.

Our clients spoke more than 23 languages, with the majority of non-English speakers speaking Somali or Spanish.

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Keiko Sugisaka
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Mingli Wu
Tong Wu
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James L. Young
Josiah Young
Laurie Young
Rebecca Zadaka
Seth Zawila
Laurie Zennner
Linfan (Derek) Zha
Kevin Zhao
Manly Zimmerman
Austen Zuege
Samantha Zuehlke
Henry Zurn
Julia Zwak

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Adobe, Inc.
American Family Insurance
Ameriprise Financial, Inc.
Best Buy Co., Inc.
Cargill Law
Daikin Applied
Danaher
The Dorsey & Whitney Foundation
Felhaber Larson Foundation
General Mills
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Greenberg Traurig, LLP
JAMF
Lathrop GPM Foundation
Maser Amundson Boggio, P.A.
Maslon LLP
Medtronic, Inc.
MSBA Public Law Section
Nilan Johnson Lewis PA
Pentair
Polaris Industries
Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation
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Sherwin-Williams Company
Spiral Financial Inc.
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TCF Bank
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Winthrop & Weinstine, P.A.
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