



# MODELS OF JUSTICE



**MLRI** MASSACHUSETTS  
LAW REFORM  
INSTITUTE

ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022

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# Letter to Our Supporters and Partners



The past few years have been challenging, testing us individually and as a nation. Compounding crises exposed and exacerbated long-standing societal injustices, but also brought communities together to create powerful movements for change. As has been the case so many times since our founding, MLRI rose to meet the moment, marshaling our half-century of experience in advocacy and partnering with a strong coalition of allies to address the demands of our time.

Reflecting on my 12 years at MLRI, I recognize how far the organization has come. From 2011 to 2022, the staff more than doubled, from 15 to 35 full and part-time employees. Our budget increased from \$2.2M to \$5.5M. We recently moved to newer office space at 40 Court Street, now spanning 1.5 floors in a modern new workspace that inspires better communication, collaboration, and efficiency. I'm honored and humbled to see such growth, which is a testament to the work of our incredible staff, our dedicated Board of Trustees, and our generous supporters. They continue to help improve the lives of our most vulnerable community members and produce models for justice throughout Massachusetts.

I see these models of justice in our partners throughout the state who organize relentlessly. I see them in my staff of passionate advocates who inspire me daily with their commitment to achieving justice for all. I see them in our donors and institutional funders who choose to dedicate their resources to causes that will bring about a more equitable Commonwealth. I see them in our many advocacy partners who work with us to advance justice. And I see them, of course, in the people who persevere against all odds to find dignity and hope despite the dehumanizing consequences of poverty and racial injustice. We're proud to share some of their stories in this annual report.

After more than a decade at the helm of MLRI, I remain as committed as ever to the belief that advancing collective economic prosperity, dismantling racialized systems, and increasing access to opportunity and justice for all benefits everyone in society." As always, I thank you for your support and partnership, and look forward to the next ten years of fighting alongside all of our partners to advance the cause of economic, racial, and social justice in Massachusetts and beyond.

Georgia D. Katsoulomitis  
Executive Director

## MISSION

Founded in 1968, MLRI is a nationally-recognized nonprofit poverty law and policy center that *provides statewide advocacy and leadership* in advancing laws, policies, and practices that *secure economic, racial, and social justice for low-income people and communities*. We undertake systemic advocacy through impact litigation, legislative and administrative advocacy, coalition building, and other strategies. MLRI's approach is based on a racial justice and anti-racist framework and community-driven strategies that lead to widespread change that improves the lives of low-income people throughout Massachusetts.

## MLRI at a Glance

### ADVOCACY AREAS

#### Income Supports & Benefits

We tackle systemic barriers that prevent low-income families, children, seniors, and people with disabilities from accessing essential support and income stabilization.

#### Housing

We promote affordable, safe, and stable housing in thriving and diverse communities.

#### Hunger & Food Security

We work to alleviate food insecurity and hunger in Massachusetts by increasing SNAP participation and benefits amounts.

#### Immigration

We secure and defend the social and economic rights of low-income immigrants in Massachusetts.

#### Racial Equity

We identify issues impacting the state's communities of color and devise strategies, in collaboration with communities, to diminish systemic barriers and promote equal rights and equal opportunities.

#### Child Welfare

We advance policies and practices that are family-centered and achieve outcomes most favorable for low-income children and families.



#### Civil Legal Aid for Victims of Crime

We co-lead the statewide legal aid initiative created in 2017 to increase access to civil legal services for vulnerable crime victims.

#### Family Law & Domestic Violence

We advance policies and practices that protect domestic violence survivors and their children when they must interact with the court system and state agencies.

#### Health Care

We ensure that all low-income and vulnerable individuals and families have access to affordable, quality health care.

#### Language Access

We improve language access for people who are best served in a language other than English and for Deaf or Hard of Hearing people in the courts, government agencies, schools and other institutions.

### WEBSITES PROJECT

Launched in 2005, the Massachusetts Legal Aid Websites Project is a special statewide initiative funded by the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation. The Websites Project is developed and maintained by MLRI and provides online legal information and other resources to the general public and to the Massachusetts advocacy community.

The Project includes two statewide legal information websites, MassLegalHelp.org and MassLegalServices.org. These websites are viewed millions of times each year by people seeking trusted, reliable information about critical legal issues that affect low-income people.

The Project also oversees the Massachusetts Legal Resource Finder, the Commonwealth's legal services triage and online referral portal. In 2017, the Websites Project launched Mass Legal Answers Online, an innovative virtual legal helpline to provide targeted legal advice to low-income people. More than 8,000 questions have been answered since the website launched.



### STATEWIDE SUPPORT CENTER

Along with undertaking systemic advocacy, MLRI also serves as the statewide multi-issue poverty law support center for the Massachusetts civil legal aid delivery system. Our advocates provide substantive legal and policy expertise, trainings, and technical assistance to local legal aid programs, social services, health and human service providers, community-based organizations and other anti-poverty advocacy programs that serve low-income people. In our support capacity, MLRI also leads or co-leads several issue-based statewide legal aid coalitions that bring together and coordinate the legal aid community.



# MLRI's Impact in 2021-2022

In the face of all the trials and tribulations of the last few years, MLRI achieved a host of legislative and systemic victories. Our advocacy partners, funders, and donors have all invested in our ability to affect positive impact in times of need. That investment paid off in real impact for real people.

**With tens of thousands of families facing the trauma of housing insecurity due to the health and economic destruction of the coronavirus crisis, MLRI:**

- Worked with advocacy partners and community organizations to implement an eviction moratorium that prevented tens of thousands of families from losing their homes.
- Partnered with MLAC and legal services to quickly scale up the COVID Eviction Legal Help Project (CELHP), a large-scale statewide effort which provided access to housing stability legal assistance for low-income tenants and owner occupants in approximately 4,700 cases, assisting an estimated 11,745 people of which at least 4,000 were children.
- Served as co-counsel with Northeast Legal Aid for Devenscrest Tenants Association in their effort to preserve the long-term affordability of their 110-unit neighborhood in Ayer and avoid mass displacement of residents.

**With the continued assault on the social safety net programs that protect vulnerable populations from the devastating effects of poverty, MLRI:**

- Co-led the Lift Our Kids Coalition with Greater Boston Legal Services to secure another increase in cash assistance grants, the third increase in three years after 30 years of stagnation, bringing \$10 million a month more in critical aid to 125,000 Massachusetts residents.
- Enlisted bi-partisan support from the State Legislature for passage of legislation to both prevent "school meal shaming" practices and require

school districts to maximize federal child nutrition dollars, contributing to Project Bread's successful Universal School Meal budget campaign.

- Secured \$3.7M in ARPA funding for grants for two- and four-year public colleges to address food insecurity among students during COVID as part of MLRI's legislative campaign to secure passage of a Hunger Free Campus Initiative.
- Successfully advocated for state budget language changes that improve the effectiveness of SNAP benefits by directing the Administration to create a common application for SNAP, MassHealth, cash assistance, and other needs-tested benefits; allowing low-income households to apply for SNAP food benefits at the same time they are applying for or renewing MassHealth online; and allowing seniors and people with disabilities to boost their SNAP benefits by self-declaring medical costs.
- Advocated for protections and process improvements to maximize retention of health care benefits for eligible members in advance of the end of the COVID public health emergency.

**With justice in almost all aspects of daily life proving inequitable to communities of color and immigrants, MLRI:**

- Secured access to legal counsel for immigrant detainees through a precedent-setting decision in a First District case, addressing a critical systemic barrier for low-income immigrants.
- Filed multiple comments on announced and proposed versions of a new, more humane public charge rule that was adopted by the Biden Administration to replace the draconian rule imposed during the previous Administration.
- Launched a statewide Digital Equity Project and formed a Digital Equity Work Group to examine the racial digital divide and advance initiatives to ensure broadband internet and technology is accessible to all households in the Commonwealth.

INCOME	2021	2020
Grants and Contracts	6,115,191	5,051,544
Fundraising/Donations	200,823	191,528
Interest Income	1,559	1,702
Other	2,675	162,718
<b>Total income before donated services</b>	<b>6,320,248</b>	<b>5,407,492</b>
Donated Services	149,534	53,400
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$6,469,782</b>	<b>\$5,460,892</b>
EXPENSES	2021	2020
Salary and Benefits Subtotal	3,589,872	3,001,240
Non-Personnel:		
Occupancy	366,317	369,936
Equipment and Supplies	154,002	77,246
Contract Services	797,580	446,632
Miscellaneous	88,786	70,919
<b>Non-Personnel Subtotal</b>	<b>\$1,406,685</b>	<b>\$964,733</b>
Donated/pro bono professional services	149,534	53,400
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES (excluding donated/pro bono professional services)</b>	<b>\$4,996,557</b>	<b>\$3,965,973</b>
<b>Change in net assets</b>	<b>\$1,323,691</b>	<b>\$1,441,519</b>

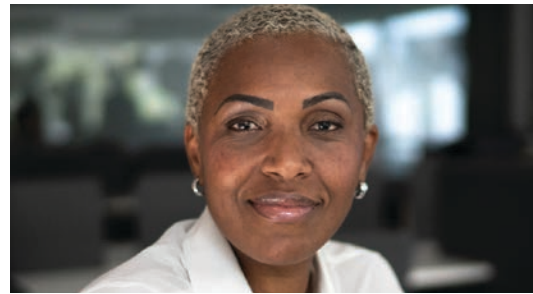
Source: Audited Financial Statements

# MLRI by the Numbers



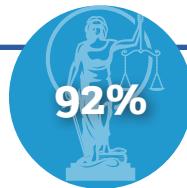
Monthly increase in critical aid to 125,000 children and their parents, elders, and people with disabilities through cash assistance grant increases

Number of unique users that visited MassLegalHelp.org from January 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022



Number of legal aid community and advocacy partners who attended one of our 177 substantive training sessions

Number of families with children under 6 who received retroactive EBT benefits after being incorrectly left out of pandemic response payments



Percentage of positive housing stability outcomes in closed cases receiving extended services through the COVID Eviction Legal Help Project

Number of unique visitors to FindYourFunds.org, an online one-stop shop for accessing government tax benefits that has been recognized by the White House as a model for Child Tax Credit outreach



“

*Today's environment requires organizations that are focused on systemic change to really go deeper...listening to the voices of those with lived experience and making sure those folks are at the table when you formulate strategies to tackle issues like economic justice and bridging the digital divide. What impresses me is that MLRI is committed to doing just that.*

— Brent Henry, while accepting MLRI's 2022 Catalyst for Change Award

# Client Story of Impact

## Expanding access to critical benefits programs



**M**ary\* had a childhood marked by sustained physical, sexual, and mental abuse. She had her first child at age 14 as a result of statutory rape, then her partner forced her into prostitution and introduced her to crack. She spent her teenage years suffering from PTSD and struggling with drug addiction to cope.

In the throes of her addiction she was charged with applying three times for replacement food stamps that the state agency said she had already received. She does not remember what actually happened and didn't challenge the agency's findings at the time. Unfortunately for her, federal law imposes a permanent ban on SNAP benefits for three such infractions. Despite turning her life around — overcoming her addiction, obtaining counseling for her PTSD, and even working for five years at a homeless shelter before the pandemic — for more than three decades, Mary was denied critical nutrition assistance.

"They didn't help me for 34 years," Mary related. "It made me feel scared because I couldn't imagine growing old and not being able to get the food help that everyone else can get. I was in tears."

Thankfully, her case came to the attention of MLRI. Our experienced benefits advocates discovered that the SNAP law had been wrongly applied by the state

in Mary's case — and successfully had Mary's disqualification overturned. The state agency vacated the permanent disqualification and awarded Mary nearly \$5,000 in retroactive SNAP benefits. Thanks to MLRI, last year, for the first time, Mary was able to spend Thanksgiving cooking a big dinner for her family, a joyous holiday experience that hadn't previously been available to her.

Mary is back to working now and not currently receiving SNAP. But if her income ever goes down, she has the peace of mind to know that she won't be barred.

"There needs to be a way for the rules to incorporate forgiveness," Mary said. "There is always someone going through the same thing I went through. We shouldn't just be written off."

MLRI has always fought for those who the system has failed, who felt like they've been written off. Mary is not alone in her situation, and MLRI will continue to ensure that people like her have the advocacy and support they need to meet their basic needs.

***"There needs to be a way for the rules to incorporate forgiveness. There is always someone going through the same thing I went through. We shouldn't just be written off."***

## MODELING JUSTICE: Common App Coalition



The Common App Coalition is an alliance of more than 150 organizations across Massachusetts committed to reducing hunger and alleviating poverty, led by MLRI and the National Association of Social Workers – Massachusetts Chapter (NASW-MA). Over the past few years, the Coalition advocated for Massachusetts to adopt a common application across a variety of need-based benefits programs in order to make them more efficient and effective, close participation gaps, and ensure more residents have access to the programs and resources they desperately need.

After successfully advocating for the inclusion and implementation of language in the state's FY21 and FY22 budgets that allows low-income households to apply for SNAP food benefits at the same time they are applying for or renewing MassHealth online, the Coalition continued to push legislators to go a step further.

Last summer, the Legislature officially re-enacted language for the FY23 budget that had initially been amended by Governor Baker, directing the Administration to create a common application for SNAP, MassHealth, cash assistance, childcare and housing subsidies, fuel assistance, and other needs-tested benefits.

MLRI and the rest of the Coalition now look forward to continuing to work on the implementation of this initiative with the new Healey administration.

\*name and photo changed for anonymity

# Staff Story of Impact

## Mario Parades is advocating for just immigration policies



**A**s the son of Guatemalan immigrants, MLRI staff attorney Mario Paredes knows first-hand how hard immigrants in this country fight to be valued and respected.

“Those who travel to the U.S. know how hard the journey to leave their country can be and those fortunate enough to make it to the U.S. are often stunned by the number of obstacles that our government places in their way,” Paredes says.

Thanks in part to the sacrifices his own parents made, Mario has always felt called to serve this community. After initially earning a Masters in Higher Education, he eventually decided to pursue a career in legal advocacy. He began by interning with Kids in Need of Defense and at the Massachusetts State House while he pursued his law degree. When he finished law school, he was ready to tackle immigration policy head-on.

“I chose to work at MLRI because I wanted to immerse myself into a space that would allow me to blend my passion for law, policy, and community-based advocacy in support of low-income immigrants.”

MLRI is unique in that it both has a staff of nationally recognized leaders with decades of experience and it ensures its attorneys work together on intersectional issues related to poverty and race. Every advocacy effort is considered from multiple perspectives and attacked from multiple angles.

MLRI’s immigration advocates have helped make several positive contributions to the advancement of immigrant rights.

MLRI won a preliminary injunction in a federal district court case challenging the federal regulation denying CARES Act emergency grants to college students with certain immigration statuses. MLRI also settled a parole class action litigation, causing ICE to resume parole for asylum-seekers in Massachusetts who are in removal proceedings or have a final order of removal.

In partnership with Prisoners’ Legal Services and under the internal direction of Mario, MLRI launched a new Immigrant Detention Conditions Project, which aims to challenge ICE detention and address multiple issues faced by detained immigrants, including discrimination, placement in solitary confinement, language access needs, medical and mental health care, food and sanitation, and access to programming and services.

“I am proud that I work for an organization that never forgets about immigrants and that always has their best interest at heart,” Paredes says.

Mario is thankful for the mentorship from his colleagues that have made him a more effective, well-rounded attorney and advocate. In return, he and other next generation advocates like him are contributing a new wave of ideas to the organization’s advocacy.

**“I am proud that I work for an organization that never forgets about immigrants and that always has their best interest at heart.”**

## MODELING JUSTICE: Special Immigrant Juvenile Litigation



MLRI played a key role in advocacy and litigation efforts that led U.S. Customs & Immigration Services to implement a major national policy change that gave thousands of Special Immigrant Juveniles (SIJs) – young people who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected – access to previously denied legal status and employment authorization. Without Employment Authorization Documents (EADs), these young people had been unable to work lawfully, help support their families, obtain social security numbers, apply for driver’s licenses, or pursue higher education.

MLRI wrote to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) proposing three alternatives to correct the problem. When DHS did not promptly change course, MLRI and our partners — pro bono attorneys from Nutter McLenne & Fish and Demissie & Church as well as legal services partner Political Asylum/Immigration Representation Project – filed a series of lawsuits that became a class action on behalf of SIJs in Massachusetts.

Shortly after, DHS announced a nationwide “deferred action” and EAD program for SIJs that had been one of our proposed remedies. MLRI and co-counsel continued to pursue the litigation while also monitoring implementation of the new policy. Since then, more than 38,500 young people nationally (over 85%) have obtained deferred action under the policy and nearly all received their EADs.

# Community Partner Story of Impact

## Gladys Vega is leading the movement for housing justice



**R**ising rents and income inequality leave low-income communities across Massachusetts vulnerable to housing instability, food insecurity, and poor health outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic brought all of those issues to the forefront. Thankfully for the residents of Chelsea, Gladys Vega was there, ready to step in.

Starting at what was then called the Chelsea Collaborative as a receptionist more than 30 years ago, Vega slowly worked her way up, remaking and strengthening the organization as she went. Vega has served as the Executive Director of La Colaborativa for the past 15 years, turning the organization into a statewide powerhouse and an important advocacy partner for MLRI.

La Colaborativa is an organization that has a hand in almost every social service offered in Chelsea — from housing to food assistance to aiding victims of domestic violence. Over the last decade, MLRI has worked with Gladys and La Colaborativa on a plethora of major housing initiatives: to root out embezzlement and corruption at the Chelsea Housing Authority, develop an apprenticeship program for public housing tenants, oppose mandatory rent escrow bills, advocate for a statewide housing court, provide housing ‘know your rights’ trainings for tenants, pass legislation making it illegal for landlords to list minors in an eviction complaint, and establish a right to counsel.

But even before Vega was a key ally for MLRI, La Colaborativa’s leader was looking to MLRI for information and inspiration on how to turn her local social service organization into a policy advocacy juggernaut.

“MLRI was able to talk about legal help in a way that’s understandable for normal people; they use

vocabulary for local people and community organizers to understand legal practice work without being a lawyer,” says Vega. “Because of that, MLRI has the capacity to remove walls and create incredible movement for communities to lead on legal justice.”

When the pandemic put thousands of families in Chelsea at risk of eviction from their homes, Vega got to work organizing. Thanks to the efforts of La Colaborativa and many other advocacy partners and organizers, Massachusetts implemented an eviction moratorium that prevented tens of thousands of families from losing their homes.

Long before the Boston Globe recognized Gladys Vega as one of the Bostonians of the Year for 2020, the leader was earning plaudits from the advocates at MLRI who have worked with her for years.

“Gladys and La Colaborativa are strategic, collaborative, and fearless — in the community, on the front lines, in the press,” says MLRI staff attorney Annette Duke. “They have fostered important relationships with national, state, and municipal elected leaders, have fostered broad-based relationships in their community with everyone. They bring their community members to City Hall and the State House. They hold rallies, they show up for rallies. They connect problems into policy. They are amazing.”

**“MLRI comes to your community, your neighborhood. They prepare community members with the knowledge they need to lead. We become one; they are the lawyers but we’re still calling the shots — not everyone coming to communities of color gets that.”**

### MODELING JUSTICE: Advancing Housing Justice



In Massachusetts, as soon as an eviction case is filed, a tenant has an eviction record — a blot on their name that is often used to reject them from future housing opportunities, regardless of the outcome of their case and with no process for record sealing. On average, 40,000 people faced eviction in the Commonwealth each year before the pandemic. After eviction moratoriums depressed those numbers the past few years, evictions are starting to climb again, highlighting the need to pass new protections for renters.

Partners around the state formed the Pass the HOMES Act Coalition to raise support for the Act Promoting Housing Opportunity and Mobility through Eviction Sealing. While the bill was successfully passed by the State Legislature in 2021, Governor Baker vetoed the provision designed to seal eviction records from a public database. The Legislation was re-filed in January of 2023.

The battle for housing justice doesn’t stop with the HOMES Act. MLRI and La Colaborativa are two of 230+ partners on the MA Access to Counsel (ATC) Coalition, which seeks to ensure low-income people have resources and assistance to prevent eviction and stabilize their housing. MLRI and the ATC Coalition remain committed to seeing this fight through, with ATC legislation re-filed in 2023.



# Donor Story of Impact

## John Carroll is redefining the role of nonprofit donors



According to John Carroll, “Life is lived going forward, but understood looking back.” In his eighth decade of life and more than 40 years into a successful legal career, Carroll has a lot to reflect on.

He has come to realize that the best thing that ever happened to him was his mother emigrating to the United States before he was born. While she grew up poor and oppressed as part of a large family in Ireland under British rule, John’s experience in America was one of education, opportunity, freedom, safety, and prosperity.

The second best thing to ever happen to him was the year he spent working at South Dakota Legal Services on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Sioux Reservations. Fresh out of law school and struggling to find work, it was a job accepted out of desperation to care for his family, but working amidst great poverty on the reservation opened his eyes to the power of and need for the law.

“Mark Twain once said that the two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you realized why you are here,” says Carroll. “I realized why I was here at South Dakota Legal Services. It was biblical. Native Americans are treated as the least of God’s children. They have enormous rights that had never been asserted.”

That experience early in his career awakened for Carroll a belief that working as a lawyer was synonymous with serving those in need, and reinforced his philosophical worldview that there is no natural hierarchy in life, even if society is riven with it.

While the next 40 years of his career were spent working as a trial lawyer, Carroll always maintained

various roles in the legal service sector on the side. Still, Carroll never thought of himself as worthy of involvement with MLRI.

“I was in the trenches,” Carroll remarks. “MLRI was the strategic headquarters.”

In John’s mind, MLRI was like the “Pentagon” of legal service programs, where great systemic advocacy was — and continues to be — conceived and exquisitely carried out. Working at the center of a web of like-minded programs and allies makes MLRI an influential voice in matters pertaining to almost any issue impacting low-income families and communities. Further, it often serves as the teaching and training arm of legal service programs and a model across the country. Many government agencies and officials give great credence to the positions of MLRI on various legislative and regulatory matters.

“MLRI has a 50 year history that no rotating government administrator can compete with,” says John.

After decades of admiring MLRI’s work, now John is all in for the organization, supporting MLRI in a variety of ways. In addition to contributing as a donor, Carroll is serving his first term on the board of directors and has taken on an unofficial role as cheerleader, celebrating not only the success of the past two years, but of the past decade.

“Georgia and those she has chosen to bring with her have brought MLRI to a new era. There is energy and enthusiasm. There is a renewed sense of purpose and clear plans to achieve that purpose. MLRI’s future is bright.”

## MODELING JUSTICE: Next Generation Poverty Law Advocates



MLRI is fortunate to have a staff and board full of experienced and nationally-renowned advocates like John, who work tirelessly for families and communities in need. Our consistently excellent staff has, for over 50 years, amassed an impressive record of success and life-changing impact for countless people in the Commonwealth — and across the country. But as we celebrate the many achievements of our past, we also look towards the future.

Over the last several years, thanks to our generous funders and donors, MLRI brought on several new attorneys, policy advocates, and operations staff who infuse the organization with energy, ideas, and enthusiasm. We hired new program staff in our benefits, immigration, housing, health care, and racial equity practice groups, as well as the MA Legal Aid Websites Project and the Civil Legal Aid for Victims of Crime (CLAVC) Project (the latter two projects generously funded by MLAC). Our staff not only spans generations, but also works with a lens of intersectionality and with passion and vision for racial justice and community-driven advocacy. In the coming years, we plan to hire even more staff to meet the growing needs of the people and communities we serve.

We are excited and proud to be cultivating and mentoring the next generation of great advocates who will continue MLRI’s legacy of impact and excellence into the future.

**“MLRI has a 50-year history that no rotating government administrator can compete with.”**

# Racial Justice Story of Impact

## Virginia Benzan is infusing racial justice into legal aid



**T**he connection between race and poverty in America is undeniable. It is rooted in years of systemic discrimination and biases that created conditions of inequality.

“Race shouldn’t predict whether you experience poverty, whether you receive pain medication, have your children taken away, or have access to quality education, housing...,” says Virginia Benzan, MLRI’s Director of Racial Justice Advocacy. “Right now, as it has always been, race has been a strong predictor of how one will fare in life.”

Since taking on the role of leading MLRI’s Race Equity Project, Benzan has tackled racial inequality head on, working across all substantive issue areas to not only ensure that discussions about racism and racial equity remain at the forefront of everything we do, but also to infuse that ethos in Massachusetts’ civil legal aid community more broadly.

In the first two years of her work at MLRI, Benzan has become a trusted resource and worked collaboratively with legal services and community based organizations to advance a racial justice agenda. She has revived the Race Equity Coalition of legal service and pro bono attorneys and advocates in the state, even tripling the size of the active membership. Under Benzan’s leadership, the Coalition has hosted a number of training programs and discussions including “Addressing Racism in the Courts” and “Community Lawyering.” She has started a Racial Justice newsletter highlighting advocacy initiatives and providing

information about upcoming programs and materials related to racial justice. Benzan has also created a Racial Justice practice area within the MassLegalServices website containing articles, toolkits, webinars, slides, videos, and other resources to enhance the civil legal aid community’s knowledge about racial justice, provide guidance on how to apply a racial equity lens to legal aid work, and to strengthen capacity and skills to advance racial justice. She conducts trainings and acts as a panelist on racial justice issues including preparing legal aid’s Americorp volunteers. She has taken the lessons she learned at the Racial Justice Institute at the Shriver Center on Poverty Law and brought them to colleagues at MLRI and beyond. Now, advocates are rethinking how to apply a racial justice lens to their work.

“There’s one question I ask myself when I examine any issue, policy, procedure, or proposal: Does it reinforce racial disparities or break them down?”

Understanding and addressing issues of race and implicit bias and developing an agenda to affirmatively advance racial equity is critical to ensure economic and social justice for all Massachusetts residents. Thanks to the work of Virginia Benzan, MLRI is working to ensure that it’s not just a trendy focus of the moment but a legitimate long-term commitment.

**“There’s one question I ask myself when I examine any issue, policy, procedure, or proposal: Does it reinforce disparities or does it break them down?”**

## MODELING JUSTICE: Addressing the Racial Digital Divide



MLRI recognizes the role that broadband internet plays in allowing people to access crucial information, opportunities, and resources. Lack of access to the internet creates barriers that disproportionately disadvantage low-income people and communities of color. Without fixed broadband access, civil legal aid clients struggle to attend online court hearings, schedule medical appointments and evaluations, participate in school, and apply for unemployment, cash assistance, and food benefits.

Over the past two years MLRI has conducted extensive outreach about the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) — a federal benefit providing discounts on monthly internet bills and certain devices for qualifying households. Given the skepticism that internet providers and federal programs elicit in these communities, MLRI utilized our reputation as a trusted source of information to generate engagement with this program.

We held information sessions with nonprofits, community organizations, school districts, senior centers, financial aid offices, libraries, courts, and local and state government about the ACP. After MLRI’s advocacy, the MA Dept. of Transitional Assistance sent text messages to all state SNAP and cash-assistance beneficiaries about the ACP, which increased enrollment and earned recognition from the White House as a national model.

# Thank you to our 2021 & 2022 donors!

## \$5,000,000+

**Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC)**



Our work would not be possible without the generous contributions from the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), who has been our champion for several decades. We are so proud of the work we've accomplished together to provide low-income people across Massachusetts with the critical legal support they need, and are thankful to continue to call MLAC a partner.

## INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTERS

### \$100,000+

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation  
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities  
Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)  
Hyams Foundation  
Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds

### \$50,000 - \$99,999

Barr Foundation  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Fenway Community Development Corporation  
Massachusetts Bar Foundation  
Point32Health Foundation

### \$10,000 - \$49,999

Boston Bar Foundation  
Boston Children's Hospital  
The Fish Family Foundation  
Mass General Brigham  
Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA)  
Menemsha Family Fund  
The Nathan Cummings Foundation  
Project Bread  
Ropes & Gray LLP  
Tusk Philanthropies

### \$5,000 - \$9,999

Beth Israel Lahey Health  
Casner & Edwards LLP  
Fiduciary Trust Company  
Foley Hoag LLP  
Goulston & Storrs  
Meehan, Boyle, Black & Bogdanow PC  
Mintz Levin Cohen Glovsky and Popeo PC  
Nutter McClennen & Fish LLP  
Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP

### <\$5,000

Allumette Fund  
American International Group  
Barclay Damon  
Cambridge Trust  
Conn Kavanaugh Rosenthal Peisch & Ford LLP  
Dell  
Foley & Lardner LLP  
Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation  
Gesmer Updegrove LLP  
Hamel, Marcin, Dunn, Reardon & Shea PC  
Hemenway & Barnes LLP  
Highland Street Foundation  
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