

2021

IMPACT REPORT

**PURSUING JUSTICE.
RESTORING HOPE.**



PRAIRIE STATE
LEGAL SERVICES

REFLECTIONS OF THE INCOMING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

SUPPORTING RECOVERY AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE.



Dear friends and supporters,

This past year was filled with cautious optimism and constant uncertainty. Vaccines became available and hopes increased, only to have COVID variants delay our return to normal. But when we think about what we've navigated together, this past year was nothing short of extraordinary.

Last year began a transition to new leadership for Prairie State Legal Services (PSLS) following the announcement of long-time Executive Director Mike O'Connor's resignation in late August 2021. Despite this time of transition, we are finally building on the momentum we created leading up to the pandemic. With your support, not only did we "hold the line" in 2021, PSLS expanded in both size and scope, launching our new Restore. Reinvest. Renew. (R3) program to reach more people in need than ever before.

— “
Over the past two years, the staff of Prairie State did what we always do. We responded.
” —

The pandemic illustrated how our work can safeguard people when crises leave vulnerable people in jeopardy of losing access to their most basic protections. It also proved, in many areas, to be a catalyst for meaningful change for those we serve.

From strengthening the safety net to expanding record sealing, our advocacy strives to give people opportunities to recover and thrive. We advocated for moratoriums on evictions, foreclosures, and utility shutoffs, and prevented homelessness, keeping families together and people connected to basic necessities. We found creative ways to reach thousands of people in our communities with important information about their rights and available resources.

I have had the privilege of leading PSLS since April 1, 2022, and it is with great pride that I present our 2021 Impact Report. In the following pages, you will read about the impact and services we provide to people in the areas of Safety, Housing, Government Benefits, and Financial Stability.

As the new Executive Director of PSLS I can say with confidence that our clients are surrounded by the best people with the biggest hearts. Looking forward, my goal is to preserve and build upon the incredible, 45-year legacy that this organization has, while simultaneously looking toward the future. We have an enthusiastic board, staff committed to providing high quality legal services and access to justice in our communities, and a strong community of volunteers.

Thank you for your vital support, which allows us to continue to pursue justice and provide hope to our clients during their toughest times. We could not do this work without you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Denise E. Conklin".

Denise E. Conklin
Executive Director



ABOUT PSLS

PSLS has provided dignity, hope, self-sufficiency, and justice through high quality civil legal services for low-income Illinoisans for 45 years. We are headquartered in Rockford, IL, and have 11 office locations serving 36 counties in northern and central Illinois.

More than 1 million people in our service area of all ages and ethnicities live in poverty. Every day, these same individuals are denied the basic rights to which they are entitled under the law simply because they cannot afford a lawyer. It's our mission to change that.

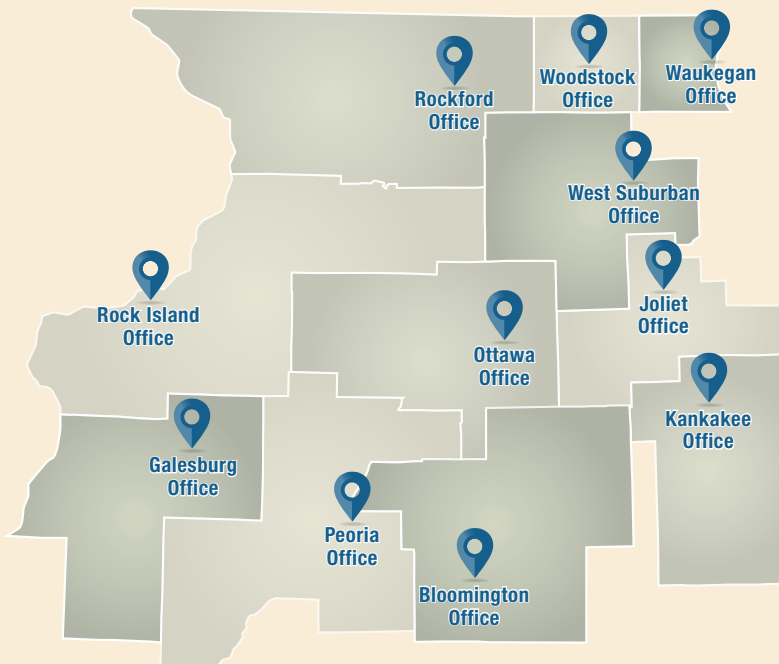
The availability of civil legal aid can make all the difference to our neighbors who are fighting to stay in their homes, escape domestic violence, secure benefits for veterans or people with disabilities, or address many other legal challenges that go to the heart of their security and well-being. They live in the communities we call home. Our communities are a better place for all of us when help is available when it's needed.

MISSION & VISION

The mission of PSLS is to ensure equal access to justice and fair treatment under the law by providing legal advice and representation, advocacy, education, and outreach that serve to protect basic human needs and enforce or uphold rights.

PSLS envisions a community where vulnerable people have ready access to legal services to meet their basic needs and where everyone knows, understands and can exercise their rights and be treated fairly in their pursuit of justice.

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Livingston, McLean and Woodford Counties
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Bloomington, Illinois 61701

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Joliet, Illinois 60432

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Ste. 100
Waukegan, Illinois 60085

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Ste. 200
West Chicago, Illinois 60185

WOODSTOCK

McHenry County
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Woodstock, Illinois 60098

CLIENT TESTIMONIALS

[PSLS's] handling of my case gave me peace of mind.

They helped seal and expunge criminal records for me so I could get a job.

Very easy to talk to, very compassionate person. It was a good experience.

[PSLS] helped me with my mother's nursing home situation. Thank you so much!

I was able to keep my home. Life changing.

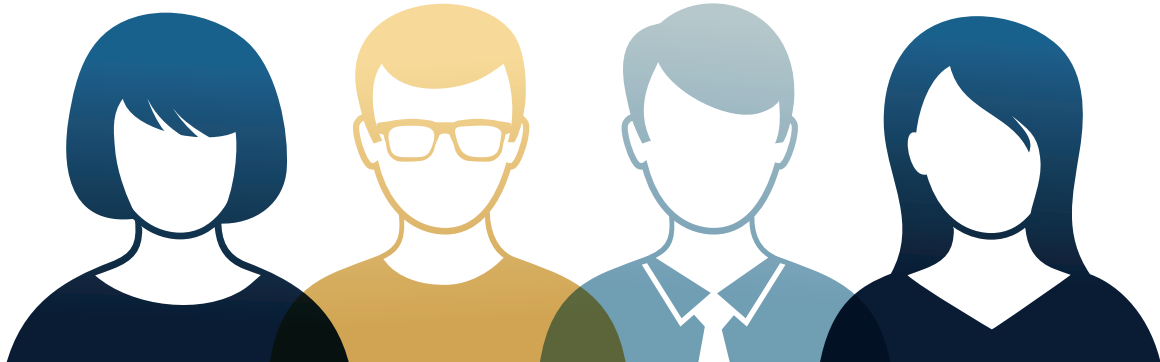
...they were sensitive to my situation, understanding, and very helpful. Friendly and nice people!

Thanks for keeping in touch to make sure that I was taken care of. I appreciate everything.

The legal aid staff were very kind to me.

Thanks to [PSLS], I no longer live in fear!

They truly heard every word and helped.



OUR IMPACT AT A GLANCE

PSLS SERVICES 2021

PSLS ACCEPTED

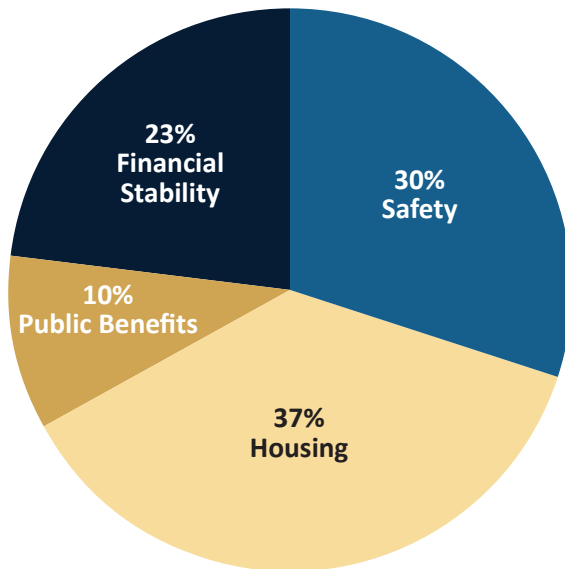
14.9K CASES

137,858 CASE MANAGEMENT/SERVICE HOURS ON CASES

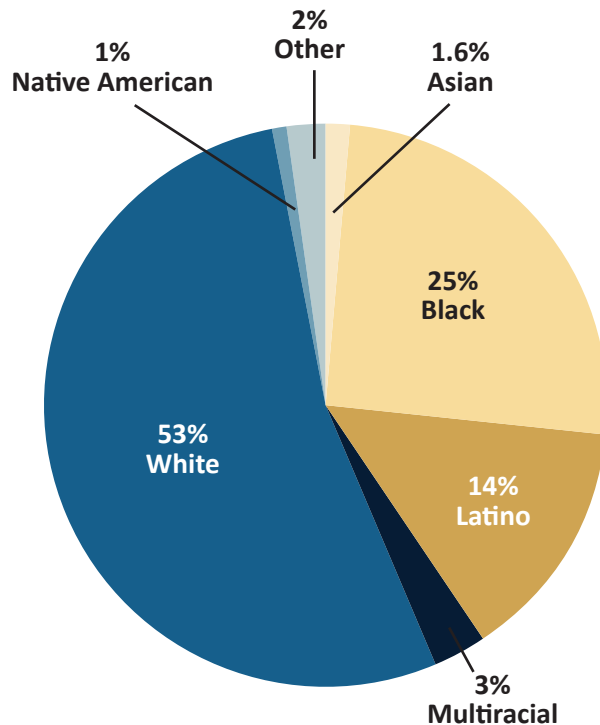
AND CLOSED

15.1K CASES

% OF CASES BY PRIORITY AREA



% OF CLIENTS BY RACE



Volunteer attorneys helped with

1,751 CASES



697

veterans, service members, and their families were provided legal assistance in civil legal issues affecting their basic human needs.



692

protective orders were obtained for households with 932 children. Within these cases, we obtained court orders of support with an annual value of \$197,929.



296

households were protected from eviction and foreclosure.



3,783

individuals 60 years old or over were served.



5,312

people were served with disabilities, includes seniors identifying as disabled.

SAFETY

EVERYONE DESERVES TO LIVE FREE FROM ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

PURSUING JUSTICE FOR LAURA*

Laura, a high school student, came to PSLS for help with a Civil No Contact Order (CNCO) against her ex-boyfriend, John*, who was a graduating senior at the same school. John sexually assaulted Laura numerous times, and was showing up at her workplace to upset her. Laura wanted a court order to stop him from contacting her or coming to her work unannounced. We prepared Laura for trial. Laura was very nervous about the trial, especially about testifying in court. She found recounting the sexual coercion she experienced to be painful, especially when she knew she would be scrutinized and potentially not believed. When opposing counsel proposed a Peace Bond Order, we discussed this with Laura and how it was different from a CNCO. Laura decided that a Peace Bond Order, which would prohibit John from communicating with her or coming near her, was the best option. We negotiated the language of the Peace Bond Order until Laura was comfortable, allowing Laura to get back to her life, without the threat of a trial, but with the reassurance of a court order instructing John to leave her alone.

HOUSING

EVERYONE DESERVES A SAFE AND DECENT PLACE TO CALL HOME

PURSUING JUSTICE FOR JOAN*

Joan, estranged from her ex-husband due to domestic violence, found employment at a bank, but lost her job when an injury left her unable to work. She supported herself and 4 children on Social Security disability, SSI benefits, and a small amount of rental assistance from the city where she lived. Joan never received child support and knew she was unlikely to ever receive it. When she came to PSLS, ComEd and NICOR had dramatically increased her bills by unlawfully charging her for utility services used by her ex-husband for a separate residence after their divorce. When she could not pay these utility bills, the electric company threatened to disconnect her utilities. One of Joan's children had asthma and needed a nebulizer, requiring electricity. ComEd would not accept a doctor's note to keep the electricity on unless Joan agreed to pay \$500 immediately and agreed to pay the remaining amount within 30 days. Lawyers at PSLS helped Joan and her children stay in her home and avoid having her utilities disconnected.

PURSUING JUSTICE FOR LINDA*

Linda was a resident of a section 8 project-based housing complex for over 20 years. While struggling with an untreated bipolar condition, she began displaying bizarre and disruptive conduct on the premises. This led Linda's landlord to file suit to evict her, threatening to make her homeless. Lawyers at PSLS requested a reasonable accommodation for her disability – to postpone the eviction proceeding while Linda attended an inpatient treatment facility to stabilize her condition and to be followed up with medication and counseling. Linda received a postponement of her eviction on this basis, the landlord monitored Linda's progress, and later voluntarily dismissed the eviction case. PSLS' work avoided potential homelessness for Linda.




STABILITY

EVERYONE DESERVES AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILY

PURSUING JUSTICE FOR JOHN*

John is a Medicaid recipient resident at a nursing home. The nursing home sought to have the Office of State Guardian appointed as guardian of John's property to access a pension of less than \$500 per month. However, the nursing home was asking to have John declared incompetent. The nursing home's petition presented him as incapable of managing his affairs—allegations that were completely false. Confined to a facility during the pandemic, John kept running into roadblocks like mail distribution issues and a pension administrator who was making things difficult for him. PSLS agreed to represent John to defend the petition, and simultaneously took steps to help him get documents to the facility and get his pension turned over to them. We reached an understanding with the nursing home that they were going to withdraw the petition when they received the appropriate documentation. Subsequently, the nursing home indicated their intention to not withdraw the petition. As a result, we requested that the court order that the hearing on our client's competency move forward. Along with requesting a hearing, which the nursing home had no good basis to win, we sent formal discovery requests requesting substantial production of documents. About three weeks later, the nursing home withdrew its petition rather than respond to the discovery. John does not have a guardian and there is no court order finding him incompetent. Instead, per John's request, we drafted Power of Attorney documents so that he can appoint his cousin as his agent in control of his property.



**[PSLS] helped me
with my mother's
nursing home
situation. Thank you
so much!**

PURSUIING JUSTICE FOR LAWRENCE*

A local Housing Authority terminated the Housing Choice voucher of a 70-year-old man, Lawrence. The voucher enabled Lawrence to live in an apartment that he could afford. Lawrence had surgery for throat cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy treatments when the Housing Authority terminated his voucher. The Housing Authority took this action because Lawrence failed to report as income a small pension of \$62 per month that he received for 5 years, which affected the amount of rent he was charged. Lawrence mistakenly believed that he previously reported this income as part of his Social Security income. However, the Housing Authority called it an intentional failure to report income. PSLS represented Lawrence at his administrative hearing on appeal and successfully proved that Lawrence made a mistake, which was not intentional. Based on Lawrence's age and health challenges, PSLS requested a reasonable accommodation so Lawrence could receive assistance with reporting at future redeterminations of eligibility for his voucher. At the hearing, the hearing officer decided entirely in Lawrence's favor, reversing the original decision to terminate his voucher and allowing Lawrence to pay the difference in rent through a repayment plan. This allowed Lawrence to maintain his subsidized housing and avoid homelessness.

PURSUIING JUSTICE FOR MARIA*

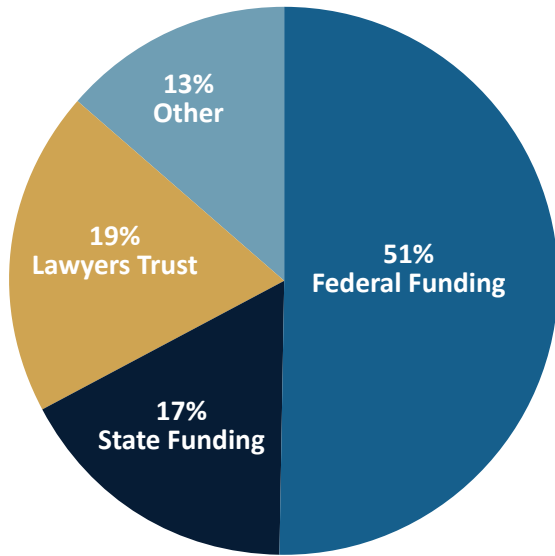
Maria was in her mid-40s when she came to PSLS, but she had been struggling with disabilities, such as schizophrenia, since her mid-20s. She was receiving Social Security disability benefits due to those disabilities. Maria should have received additional dependent benefits based on her father's work history because her disability started before she turned 22. Nevertheless, the Social Security Administration denied her request for these additional benefits. In an administrative hearing, PSLS lawyers had to prove that Maria was disabled before she turned 22 and that her limited work history did not disqualify her from receiving dependent benefits from her father's account. PSLS presented evidence and convinced the judge that Maria qualified for dependent benefits.



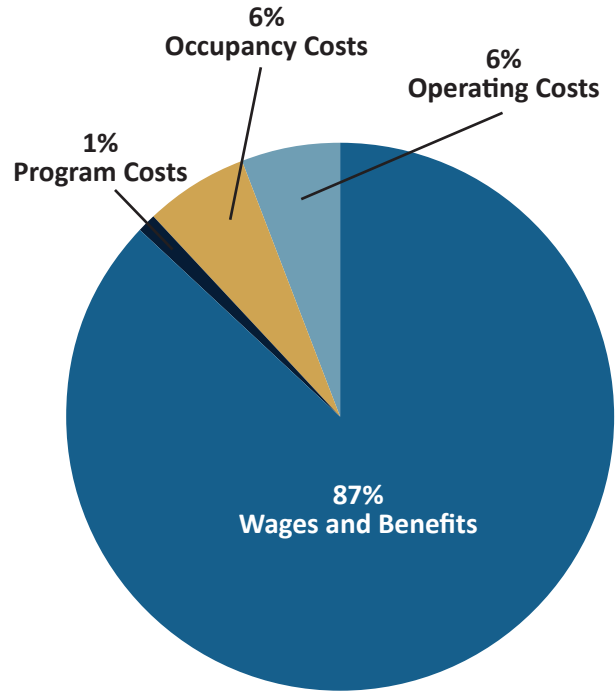
*Names have been changed to protect the identity of our clients and maintain confidentiality.

2021 REVENUE AND FINANCIALS

TOTAL 2021 REVENUE \$18,033,967



TOTAL 2021 EXPENSE \$16,174,261



*Sometimes grant timelines do not correspond with our fiscal year. This income includes funds awarded for expenses to be paid at a later date. When we have income exceeding expenses we place such funds in reserve to help us through challenging times such as when government agencies delay payments or when we face funding reductions. This planning provides continuity in services for our existing clients.





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Prairie State Legal Services relies on the support of individuals, foundations, corporations, and the local community to fulfill our mission. We are deeply grateful for every contribution. Due to space constraints, this report lists all donors who gave \$500 or more in 2021.

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AgeGuide
DuPage County Community Development
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 Cote Klinefelter

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Wendy Larson
Maureen Lawrenson
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