



The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland Building Communities of Justice

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

It's been a whirlwind year! PBRC saw enormous growth in its programs and services and served more clients than ever before. Much of our work focused on keeping people in safe and affordable housing—both renters and low-income homeowners. Our assistance to tenants at risk of eviction was our largest area of service in FY23, with PBRC staff and volunteers closing over 4,600 cases.

Through the generosity of key funders such as the Maryland Legal Services Corporation, the Baltimore County Department of Housing and Community Development, and the Administrative Office of the Courts, qualifying tenants seeking legal help in Baltimore City or Baltimore County District Court could speak to a PBRC volunteer or staff attorney and gain immediate on-site representation without a fee.

This report includes the stories of a few of our clients and quotes from some of our amazing volunteers and staff. The common theme is a commitment to eliminate barriers to effective legal assistance and offer people a chance at better lives and more stable communities.

PBRC staff and volunteers worked on both an individual client and community basis as well as more systemically as warranted to improve access to the justice system, leverage limited resources and create collaborative responses to unfair and illegal practices. This meant going into the state and immigration courthouses and neighborhoods where our target populations are, and offering immediate relief. It also meant taking on legislative advocacy to right systemic wrongs in areas of focus such as tax sale and home foreclosure, consumer fraud, and tenants' rights. In FY23, most of our clients were people of color living on an average income of \$26,000 for a household size of three that includes at least one child. Through all its projects, PBRC closed a total of 6,405 cases impacting 13,849 people.

As the statewide clearinghouse for volunteers, PBRC also trained and connected hundreds of pro bono attorneys for partner agencies benefiting even more marginalized people and communities across the state. We engaged in important policy initiatives and advocacy, continued to lead a senior-focused home preservation project, and coordinated services with our non-profit partners. Once again, we hosted the annual Partners for Justice Conference for over 300 advocates, sponsored eight newly minted Professional Skills Academy Fellows, served as the intake and referral triage program for immigration court, and offered technical assistance and support to the access to justice community.

At our very core, we remain determined to close the justice gap for those throughout Maryland facing socio-economic, racial, and structural inequities.

This annual report only touches upon the impact our team and volunteers make every day. On behalf of the entire PBRC family, we thank you for believing in our mission and supporting our work.

In appreciation,



Sima Friend, Esq. Board President



Sharon E. Goldsmith, Esq. Executive Director

PBRC's Impact in 2023

The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland (PBRC) serves a dual purpose:

- To offer direct legal services to people in need, and
- To serve as the **hub for volunteer civil legal services** in the state, matching volunteers with nonprofit legal services entities, and offering support, training, mentorship, technical assistance.



Direct Services

PBRC focuses on addressing unmet civil legal needs of marginalized populations to achieve financial and housing stability and offer safety to families. By hosting **667 community-based and courthouse clinics** throughout the year, we closed over **6,400 cases**, helping consumer debtors, tenants, at-risk homeowners, seniors, and immigrant children and families. In 2023, PBRC attorneys and volunteers prevailed in 88 - 100% of their cases across most of PBRC's projects.

In 2023, PBRC:

- Provided \$509,200 in donated legal services to low-income Marylanders who lacked access to legal representation.
- Helped 13,849 people through our direct legal services.
- Saved clients \$2,674,733 in legal fees and alleged unpaid debts so limited income could be better spent on basic necessities.
- Provided 2,355 hours of volunteer legal service through PBRC's own clinics, which helped to meet the heightened need for legal assistance.

The typical PBRC client profile is a woman identifying as Black or brown, just over age 40, and living on a yearly household income of about \$26,000 for a household size of 3 that includes at least 1 minor dependent. Overall, we directly helped 13,849 financially strapped people in Maryland.

Professional Training & Support Services

PBRC serves as the state's premier coordinator, trainer, and support center for volunteer civil legal assistance. For over 33 years, PBRC's team has recruited, trained, and mentored volunteer attorneys and other advocates to widen access to legal services. The fourth annual Professional Skills Academy also presented attorney Fellows a special opportunity for diversity, inclusion, and service with one-on-one mentorship.



In 2023, PBRC

- Trained 683 volunteer and staff advocates committed to serving low-income clients through over 35 partner organizations.
- Offered over **50 legal training courses** that can be accessed on-demand across many areas of law, including: Estate Planning, Immigration, Eviction Prevention, Veteran's Assistance, and more.
- Hosted the largest access to justice conference in the state to date with over 300 participants.

Access to Counsel in Evictions (ACE) and Tenant Lawyer of the Day Program

Preventing Homelessness Through Legal Representation in Evictions.

Most tenants appearing in Rent Court across Maryland are unrepresented by counsel and unaware of the legal process and their rights. With limited affordable housing units available, tenants on fixed incomes or with low-paying jobs find it particularly challenging to find safe and accessible housing. Rising rent prices continue to leave large swaths of individuals and families, especially those in Black and brown communities and those of lesser means, without viable options. **As a result, the state has one of the highest rates of eviction filings nationwide.**

One of PBRC's priorities is to ensure that those with legitimate defenses to evictions are competently represented in these proceedings. PBRC staff and volunteers stood in for tenants in Baltimore City and Baltimore County for every rent court docket held and worked collaboratively with our partner legal services organizations to make certain that there was full coverage for the thousands of cases in those jurisdictions.

And our efforts paid off. In FY23, **95% of clients** represented by PBRC attorneys in same-day clinics either avoided or delayed an eviction through a dismissal or postponement of their case, or effectively negotiated more time to work out a settlement and avoid an eviction. Many of these clients also successfully raised the issue of dangerous conditions in their homes, such as lack of heat, rodent infestation, and leaking roofs.

Since the program's inception, PBRC has represented more than 4,692 tenants in rent court and helped thousands more navigate complex rental and housing issues. Experienced staff attorneys also helped tenants remain housed through representation in more complicated matters such as tenant holding over, breach of lease, rent escrow, and illegal eviction actions. This saved hundreds of people from ending up in shelters, in unsafe living conditions, or on the street.

In 2023,

- PBRC held a total of 203 clinics at Baltimore
 City Rent Court and 236 clinics in Baltimore
 County Rent Court.
- Staff and volunteer attorneys triaged
 4,236 litigants and provided day-of-court representation to 2,433 tenants in their eviction cases.

As the housing crisis progressed through 2023, tenants continued to struggle to maintain adequate, safe, and affordable housing. With the roll-out of the Access to Counsel in Evictions (ACE) Program in Maryland, PBRC continued to expand the Courtroom Advocacy Project (CAP) team and more fully address the range of housing issues faced by tenants. By the end of FY23, PBRC had established a presence at all rent court dockets in Baltimore County while continuing to represent tenants in rent court in Baltimore City and developed expertise in more complicated housing-related cases brought outside of rent court. PBRC



"Volunteering in rent court affords me the chance to assist clients with immediate and profound challenges to their livelihood—ensuring they can stay in their home—and to keep a pulse on the issues people are facing in their communities and the types of policies that we should be advocating for to secure broad access to safe, stable, and healthy neighborhoods." - Lauren DiMartino, TVLD Volunteer

also began representing tenants at the subsidized housing docket in Baltimore City. These tenants are typically most at risk of experiencing homelessness. While they have unique defenses, the legal system is complicated and difficult to navigate without an attorney. Furthermore, because it is not just the immediate housing but the subsidy itself that is often at stake, it is vital that these tenants have counsel by their side.

PBRC also established a presence at the "specialty" docket in Baltimore County where we successfully worked with clients in tenant holding over, breach of lease, and even illegal eviction cases, in which landlords have attempted to evict tenants without using the court process. Without counsel, tenants facing these types of cases have very little chance of success. When working with a PBRC attorney, clients are often able to realize solutions that allow them to stay housed. Assisting tenants with rent escrow actions has likewise become a large part of our practice. We worked with tenants who face lack of heat or power, rodent infestations, water damage, and other dangerous living conditions. **Our representation** in these cases has enabled tenants to have their homes repaired, get rent abated, and in some cases be granted early lease termination without penalty.

PBRC continued to operate its own Tenant Hotline, where paralegals and attorney volunteers answered over 1,500 calls in FY23. The hotline emerged as a response to the pandemic, and PBRC determined that, despite a lack of funding for it, the service was too valuable to cease. Through this hotline, tenants were given access to legal information, advice, and referrals, which often meant the difference between stable housing and homelessness.

Henrietta's Story

With a judgment looming against her for Failure to Pay Rent, and an eviction date fast approaching, Henrietta's housing situation was dire. She was responsible for caring for her two young grandchildren and was recently diagnosed with a rare form of cancer.



Desperate for a lifeline, Henrietta and her hospital caseworker found a rental assistance program that would pay her judgement to avoid eviction. Yet they needed documentation from her landlord, which they had been unable to secure after multiple attempts. Faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, Henrietta's caseworker turned to the Tenant Hotline at the Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland for help.

The PBRC attorney who answered the call immediately set out to find a solution and through her contacts located the landlord's attorney. Her investigation and advocacy for Henrietta resulted in the landlord's attorney promptly addressing the issue, paving the way for the resolution Henrietta so desperately needed.

Just days later, relief washed over Henrietta as news arrived that the rental payment had been made and the eviction action quashed. Henrietta could finally breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that she and her grandchildren could remain in the safety and security of their home.

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Consumer Protection Project

Resolving debt lawsuits to avoid crippling judgments.

Each year, tens of thousands of people are sued for debts solely based on a sworn statement by a creditor or debt purchaser without adequate documentation. The clients who come to PBRC's Consumer Protection Project (CPP) are from all levels of society and are often overwhelmed by challenging personal circumstances like medical bills or a recent job loss. They have been summoned to appear in court yet often are not sure about the basis or legitimacy of the debt at issue, which may have been bought and sold many times prior to their court date. PBRC staffs clinics in Baltimore City and Prince George's County to assist these clients.

At the critical moment before a judgment is entered, a PBRC attorney counsels the client and often negotiates with the creditor to resolve or reduce the debt owed. The savings for the clients can be life-changing – sparing clients from having their wages garnished or from being forced to make impossible choices between paying their debt or providing for themselves and their families. Our attorneys reviewed files for viable defenses and, where appropriate, filed a Notice of Intent to Defend on behalf of the client. Alternatively, they helped clients create manageable

payment plans they can truly afford, providing them with a sustainable path to paying their debt and securing financial stability in the future.

During the pandemic, many families struggled to make ends meet after losing their jobs, having their work hours reduced, or suffering medical setbacks. In FY23, we continued to see the ripple effect of this economic turmoil, **making our services more vital than ever.** This year we saw an increase in the number of cases for which we

In 2023, PBRC:

- Provided on-site representation that helped to fully resolve cases for 98% of CPP clinic clients and receive favorable case outcomes.
- Saved \$171,770 for CPP clients so their hardearned dollars could support necessities like food and shelter.
- Advocated for 525 consumers through dayof court representation at our legal clinics.

could negotiate hardship dismissals based upon issues such as a client's age, disability, or medical condition. We also saw an increase in debts stemming from allegations of unpaid rent.



"The Consumer Protection Clinic is the [project] most likely affected by COVID, as clients faced job loss and illness – falling behind on debts and obligations. Assisting them with negotiations and defenses in eliminating or reducing the debt is extremely important and provides a mental boost for clients who experience increased levels of stress and worry at an already tumultuous time. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction when I can help them and provide relief."

- Shelia Bryant, CPP Volunteer

Alice and Edgar's Story

Alice, a 62-year-old woman, arrived at court one morning with her caregiver hoping to resolve her credit card debt. Alice had multiple sclerosis, causing her to start going blind and having to rely on a wheelchair for her mobility. At the time of her case, her husband, Edgar, was recovering in the hospital from a stroke.

At this moment, Alice could not believe how she had gotten to the position where she could no longer afford to pay for basic necessities, let alone pay off outstanding debts.

> Fortunately, Alice found PBRC's Consumer Protection Project staff at court.

> Alice and her husband were living on a very small amount of Social Security each month. They had recently been evicted for failure to pay rent and had to open a Bank of America credit card to help with expenses. When she arrived at court, Alice's credit card bill was \$10,000.

> After an initial intake, a PBRC attorney took her case and explained Alice's situation to the creditor. PBRC was able to secure Alice a hardship dismissal, meaning that her \$10,000 bill was forgiven on the spot.

> > Ecstatic, Alice and caregiver burst into tears and hugged the PBRC attorney. This was the best possible outcome for her, allowing her and her family to have peace of mind as they recover from medical emergéncies.

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Home Preservation Project

Building equity in communities by preserving intergenerational wealth.

For many families, their home is their sole significant asset. Losing a home is often the first trigger in a series of devastating economic and social consequences. For lower-income homeowners, home equity is the predominant form of accumulated wealth that our clients have and can pass on to their families. PBRC's Home Preservation Project (HPP) was created to keep people in their homes, and to help preserve and pass on intergenerational wealth.

By providing legal tools and support, we help long-time community members age in place, preserve wealth in their neighborhoods, and protect the rights of homeowners. In FY23, our team accomplished this goal through community-based clinics in estate planning, tax sale foreclosure prevention, and mortgage foreclosure counseling, which benefited 157 homeowners.

At HPP's Estate Planning clinics, our attorneys offer free life planning services to community members, including the creation of advanced medical directives, wills, and financial powers of attorney. In 2023, we hosted estate planning clinics across Baltimore City, from Cherry Hill to Waverly to Saint Agnes.

In late winter, the HPP team mailed 8,994 postcards to homeowners behind on their property taxes, inviting them to participate in a free tax sale prevention clinic or remote consultation to receive one-on-one consultations with a pro bono attorney, and education about other resources, such as programs offering direct financial assistance for property tax delinquencies, homeowners' property tax credits, energy or water assistance, and housing repairs.

Notably, in April 2023, together with our coalition partners, we successfully advocated to the Mayor of Baltimore to **remove the majority of owner-occupied properties from the tax sale lien auction**, giving nearly **2,000 City homeowners** a reprieve and additional time to resolve their delinquencies. Our team continues to lead the way in efforts to reform the system.



During the spring, the HPP team began offering ongoing representation to homeowners needing assistance with their deeds, including drafting life estate deeds to ensure the smooth transfer of the home after death, and helping heir homeowners obtain proper title to their homes.

As part of our commitment to providing holistic support to our clients, this year HPP added a new service to our repertoire: applications assistance. For our clinic clients who are eligible for and would benefit from financial assistance programs such as property tax credits, water affordability, and tax sale deferral, a member of the HPP team provided hands-on helped with the preparation and submission of program applications.

This new service helps to ensure that our clients in the most vulnerable circumstances can access the range of available assistance programs that stabilized their situations.

Marvin's Story

Marvin, a 68-year-old homeowner residing in Prince George's County, came to PBRC the day of the deadline to pay off his tax bill, or otherwise face inclusion on the tax sale auction the following week.

Marvin was an heir homeowner: He had lived in his home for 23 years, but it was purchased by his mother who passed away in 2008. Although Marvin was the legal owner of the home, he had never recorded the deed in his name -- this meant that he would have to face significant hurdles to accessing assistance programs to alleviate his property tax burden.

Despite the tight deadline, within a few hours, PBRC helped him complete his application for the Homeowners Assistance Fund, a program to assist homeowners struggling with their mortgage payments or other housing costs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This required PBRC to obtain his mother's estate paperwork, confirm that Marvin was the legal owner of the home, and draft and send a "clear-path-to-title" letter to the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development outlining his legal ownership despite

> the lack of a deed. PBRC reached out to the Tax Credit Programs Manager at the Maryland State Department of Assessments & Taxation, and described the situation. Within a few hours, PBRC received a response that they would grant Marvin a retroactive credit.

PBRC went even further and reached out to the Prince George's County Tax Sale Coordinator who was able to immediately remove Marvin from the list, thereby eliminating the threat of tax sale.

> Over the next few weeks, PBRC continued to navigate difficulties with the application process on behalf of Marvin, until his delinquency was ultimately paid off. PBRC is now helping the client to prepare

> > and record a new deed to help maintain his ownership of the home and prevent the threat of tax sale foreclosure on his home.

> > Stock photo - for illustrative purposes only.

Maryland Immigrant Legal Assistance Project

Connecting immigrants to help and hope.



Legal representation continues to be the most important determinant of success in immigration cases—yet clients have no right to appointed counsel in immigration proceedings. Without an attorney, immigrants with valid claims to remain in the United States may end up being deported simply because they are unable to decipher the complex process to make their cases.

PBRC's Maryland Immigrant Legal Assistance Project (MILAP) trains and deploys volunteer attorneys and interpreters to provide legal assistance to immigrant children and families, connect newcomers with resources for help, and preserve their claims to remain in the United

States. MILAP runs the only walk-in legal clinics in Maryland's two immigration courts, serving as the first line of defense for hundreds of immigrants per year. The team also provides direct representation to particularly vulnerable children and families who are at risk of missing important deadlines in their cases. Specifically, MILAP helps asylum-seekers complete their applications, recent arrivals in Maryland to change their court locations to Maryland, and children to obtain Special Immigrant Juvenile Status before they become too old to apply for this special pathway to residency.

In FY23, with just 1.5 attorneys and 1.25 paralegals plus volunteer participation, PBRC provided **680 consultations to individuals at risk of deportation** and closed 99 other cases for matters including motions for dismissals, applications for asylum, and motions to change venue. MILAP also worked with 12 families to help 20 children with the process to obtain Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.

Overall, PBRC successfully prevented the deportation of **25 people** by obtaining dismissals of their immigration court cases.

Volunteering at a community clinic or in court can feel daunting. You appear for the day and usually there is already a line or group of people waiting for a consultation. But surprisingly – yet it shouldn't surprise me anymore – collectively, we help every single person who arrives. The MILAP is a small but mighty team, and they inspire me.

- Cesiah Fuentes, MILAP Volunteer



Alba and Rafael's Story

Alba and her son, Rafael, and were scheduled for an 8AM deportation hearing at the Immigration Court in Baltimore City.

Since they lived on the Eastern Shore and were worried that traffic would make them late, they left their house at 4:00 AM and arrived at 6 AM - one and a half hours before the building even opened.

Upon entering, they were led through a maze of processes, being instructed by various officials to report to the ground floor, then the 6th floor, then to the 4th floor. By the time they were directed to the correct location, their hearing had already been held and in their absence, the judge ordered them to be deported.

With no one to turn to and even more unanswered questions, a guard directed the family to speak to PBRC's Maryland Immigrant Legal Assistance Project at their table in the courthouse. MILAP knew that the judge who signed their deportation orders was still holding other hearings, and immediately led Alba and her son to the courtroom, even as the guards tried to prevent MILAP from doing so.



While they were waiting to speak with the judge, another family approached MILAP indicating that they too had arrived early from Frederick County only to be redirected to an incorrect location. MILAP communicated with the judge about how both families had been treated and got their orders of deportation rescinded.

> Without MILAP being physically present at court to witness and advocate for them, neither families would've been able to even enter the courtroom.

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Community Training & Events



The Maryland Pro Bono Service Awards program honors outstanding lawyers, non-lawyers, and programs that have made significant contributions to the delivery of pro bono civil legal services to Maryland's low-income citizens. 2023 recipients helped in a wide range of case areas: family law, consumer rights, children's welfare, tax help and tax sale foreclosure prevention, immigration status, and more. These recipients were honored publicly at the MSBA Legal Summit in June 2023.

2023 Award Recipients

Alex Fee Award Meagan Allen, Esq.

Judge Robert M. Bell Award Nina Crist, Esq.

Distinguished Pro Bono Volunteer Award Conor O'Croinin, Esq.

Retired Pro Bono Volunteer Award Doris Green Walker, Esq.

> Lee A. Caplan Award Lawrence Finegan, Esq. Rue Stewart, Esq.

Herbert S. Garten Special Project Award The Office of Economic Development and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University and Johns Hopkins Health System

Non-Legal or Organizational Involvement Award Gavi Franco

> Law Firm Pro Bono Service Award Cristine Evans LoVetro, LLC

Pro Bono Program Kids in Need of Defense Family Separation Response Team



PBRC hosts the only annual statewide conference focused on access to justice. With a record number of over 340 registrants, the 24th Annual Partners for Justice Conference brought legal services program staff, members of the public and private bar, the judiciary, human services agencies, and elected officials together to stand up for the rights of the underserved in our community.

The in-person conference featured cutting-edge instruction and discussion from experts and leaders at the vanguard of the legal services community. Panels such as Linguistic Bias in the Justice System, the State of the School to Prison Pipeline in Maryland, the Future of LegalTech: How Black Lawyers are Revolutionizing the Industry, and Observations from the Bench on Access to Counsel for Evictions provided insightful analysis and practical guidance for advocates to apply directly to their work. Dana Vickers Shelley, on the eve of her five-year anniversary as the Executive Director of the ACLU of Maryland, provided a keynote addressing her lifelong advocacy for justice through her distinguished career.



PBRC's Professional Skills Academy is a one-year, cohort-based program of training, mentoring, and service for newer attorneys (Fellows). With training and the help of a mentor, Fellows have the opportunity to gain litigation skills, including how to interview clients, negotiate with other parties, represent clients in court, and counsel and draft documents for clients.

This year, PBRC welcomed the fourth class of the Professional Skills Academy. Eight Fellows, in many cases newer lawyers, were paired with experienced mentors and took part in a series of in-depth trainings. By the end of the experience, the Fellows had donated over 350 hours of pro bono service.

2023 Professional Skills Academy Fellows:

Tracy Duvall Neisha Lewis-Blagrove Alexandra Martinez-O'Reilly Shante McWhite Michael Nerstheimer Molly Timko Tangi Turner Derek Van De Walle



Designed for lawyers, law students, veterans, policymakers and other service professionals, the annual Veterans Legal Assistance Conference provides a forum for discussion of critical legal issues facing our veterans. Concurrent sessions included panels on the PACT Act, Camp Lejune claims, and presumptive claims.

This year, we were honored to have the Keynote Address provided by Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony Woods. He served two tours of duty in Iraq, where he earned a Bronze Star for his service. Secretary Woods was discharged from the U.S. Army in 2008 under the military's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy, which barred members of the LGBTQ+ community from serving openly in the military. He worked with advocates to repeal the law and then resumed his service in the U.S. Army Reserve. This conversation was moderated by Honorable Halee F. Weinstein, the first openly LGBTQ+ person appointed as a judge in the state of Maryland.



Volunteer Appreciation

Thank you to all the volunteer attorneys who donated their time to serve at one of PBRC's legal clinics, as well as the community of instructors who helped train a new cadre of pro bono leaders through a PBRC training.

Paul Ackerman Valerie Adeyeye Stefan Akorli Sadia Ali

Robert Anbinder Tasnima Apol Susan Atkins

Lindsey Avedisian Barry Bach

Josephine Bahn Jordan Bailowitz Rebecca Bainum Joan Bellistri Keisha Bishop

Neisha Blagrove Catherine Bledsoe

Raymond Brown Briya Brown

Shelia Bryant Gilton Cabrera

Marissa Caceres Miles Calabresi

Kimberly Caspari

Carlo Castillo

Selma Ciccarone

Diane Cipollone Wanda Claiborne

Timothy Cloud

Jeanette Cole Alexandra Collins

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Kathleen Donahue

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Raenetta Ellison

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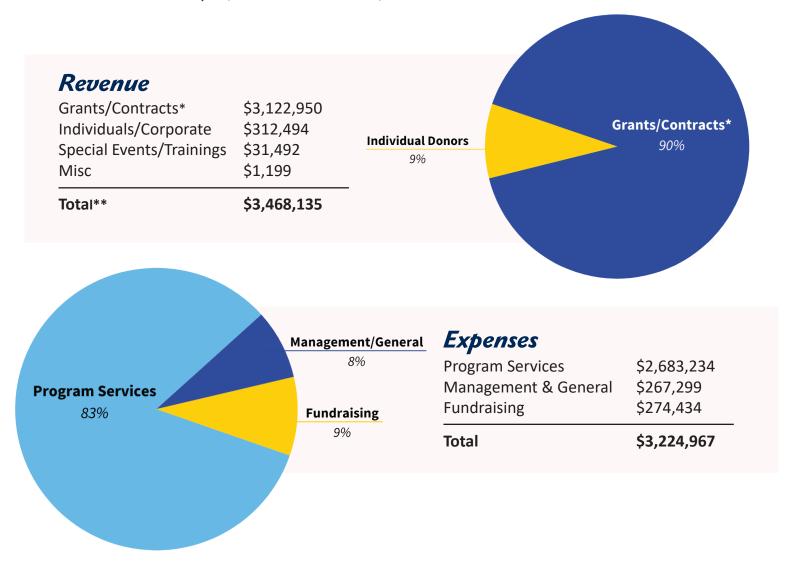
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