



Annual Report

THE COMMONS LAW CENTER

2020

The Commons
Law Center

a year's review

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



The Commons Law Center helps Oregon's low and moderate income families create safe and stable homes for their children.

That work is especially important at a time of rapid social, economic, and pandemic related changes.

In 2020, The Commons opened 220 client matters, provided 250 consultations, and referred more than 1,000 people to more appropriate legal service providers.

Now, after four years of service, we understand the access to justice gap is much bigger than most people realize.

To meet the legal needs of all Oregonians with a civil legal problem, every active lawyer in the state (including solo, corporate, in-house counsel, government, and judges) would need to donate 110 hours of pro bono hours each year, in addition to what they already give.

We believe the legal system has tremendous opportunity as a force for good. But we must continue developing new legal service delivery models to address the problem.

At The Commons, we try to minimize the trauma families experience when using the legal system.

Doing that work now, when our society is coming to terms with the extent of systemic and institutionalized racism, The Commons seeks to move humbly forward, knowing there is a lot to learn.

Our supporters and allies who share our vision help us refine, scale, and replicate our programs to serve more of those in need.

Thank you for your continued commitment to equal justice for all Oregonians.

Amanda Caffall
Executive Director

CHARITABLE SUPPORT

Over the first four years of operations, total charitable support of \$132,000 averaged less than 20% of The Commons' operating revenue. In 2021, the organization needs to increase charitable support to 30% of its annual budget to meet its goals to expand service to more clients in need of civil legal help.

10%

2020 Charitable Revenue

90%

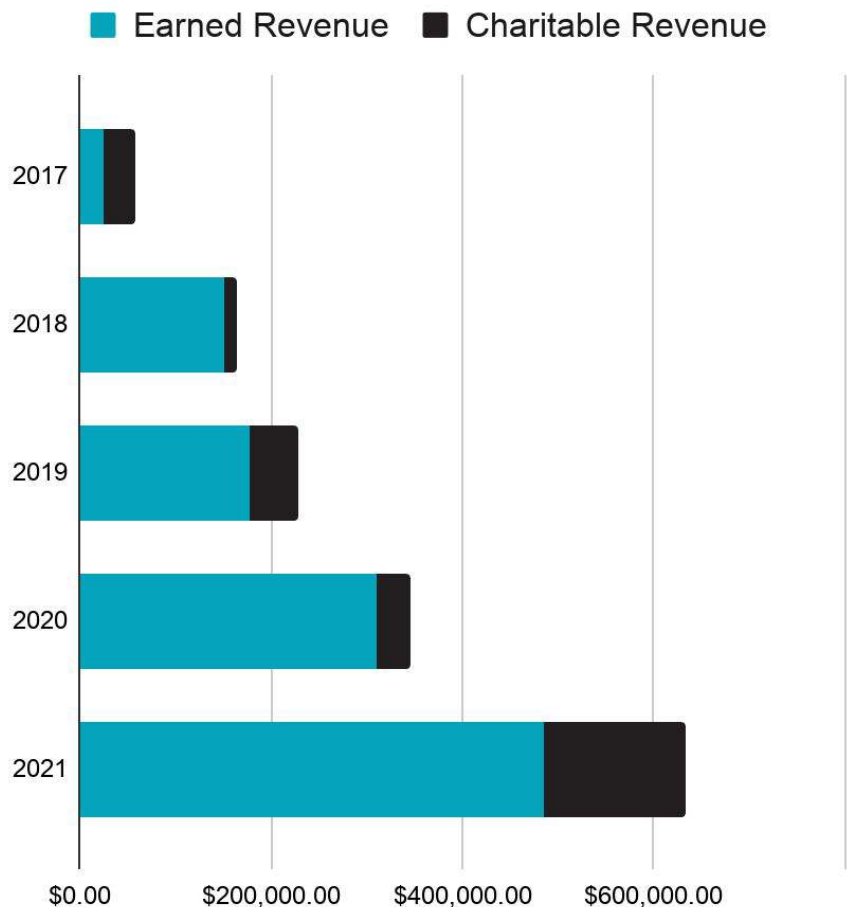
2020 Earned Revenue

At the start of 2020, The Commons had a robust family law practice and expected to see considerable growth in the estate planning program. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic required we address clients' most urgent needs - keeping their children safe, protecting their assets in case of untimely death, and providing their loved ones clarity about final health care wishes.

To better respond to these urgent client needs, we paused our small business and nonprofit programs in mid-2020.

Going forward, we will explore re-installment of business and nonprofit programs, along with potential new programs, like expungement, landlord/tenant, or immigration, based on the needs and priorities of the communities we serve.

Earned Revenue and Charitable Revenue



WHO WE SERVE

Of the families who hired The Commons for legal services last year, 72% received family law help and 28% received estate planning or probate related legal services.

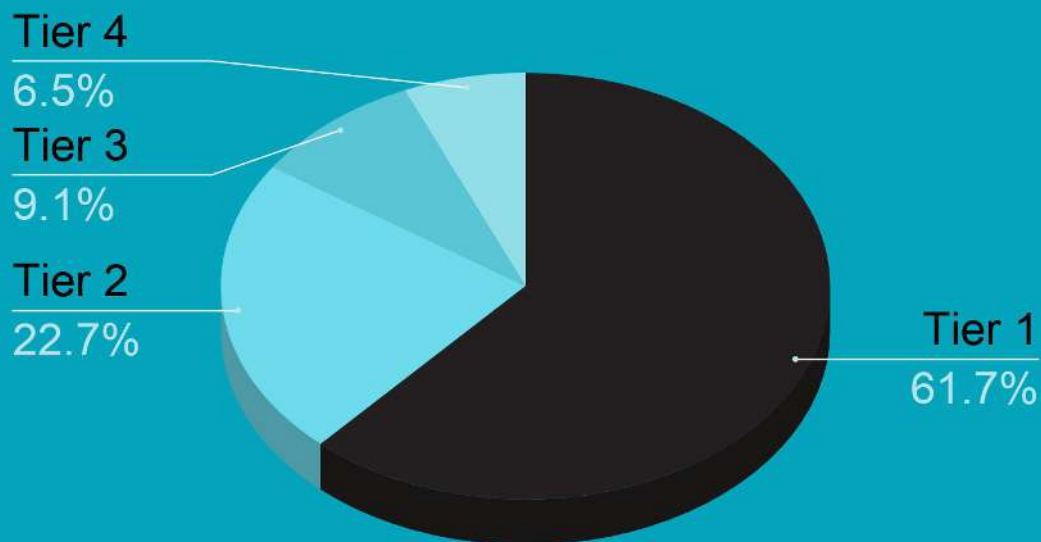
The Commons serves six income Tiers, ranging from 125% to 400% of the federal poverty level. The vast majority of clients continue to be, year after year, those who qualify for free legal services based on income.

The Commons hopes to increase the number of higher-tier clients it serves to help internally subsidize services for lower-income Oregonians.



At the highest Tiers, a family of four could make between \$90,000 and \$103,000 per year.

In 2020, Tier 5 and Tier 6 combined represented just 0.02% of our clients.



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Asset Preservation Program

Through a partnership with the African American Alliance for Homeownership, funded by the City of Portland Housing Bureau, The Commons **began providing free estate plans to longtime, low-income, largely African American individuals** who live in N/NE Portland, in or adjoining the historic Albina District.

Nearly 10,000 African Americans were displaced from N/NE Portland between 1990 to 2016; the Albina District once had the highest rate of Black homeownership in Portland's history.



More than 60% of The Commons estate planning clients were African American in 2020. We hope to increase that number over 2021 as we build awareness and trust within the community.

In March 2020, The Commons hired Ekua Hackman, a Black new lawyer to run the program. Ms. Hackman hosts monthly webinars, provides legal services, and conducts outreach in support of the program.

The American College of Trust and Estate Counsel Foundation gave a grant to support the program, which is helping bring on another lawyer of color to support the program.

Having analyzed and advised the legal services industry worldwide for more than two decades, I've seen first-hand the myriad challenges facing the legal sector and its failure to truly serve the interests of either the public or the profession. The Commons Law Center is exactly the kind of **practical, multi-faceted, innovative solution to these challenges that we need** — not only to make justice truly accessible to members of the public, but also to transform the way we train and develop lawyers to serve them. I strongly **encourage you to support The Commons Law Center and help advance its critical mission** to bring about meaningful change for the better within the legal sector.

- **Jordan Furlong**, Legal Market Analyst;
Author, *Law Is a Buyer's Market: Building a Client-First Law Firm*

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Family Law Program

The Commons launched unbundled, or limited-scope, family law services in January 2020, with critical support from the Oregon Community Foundation.

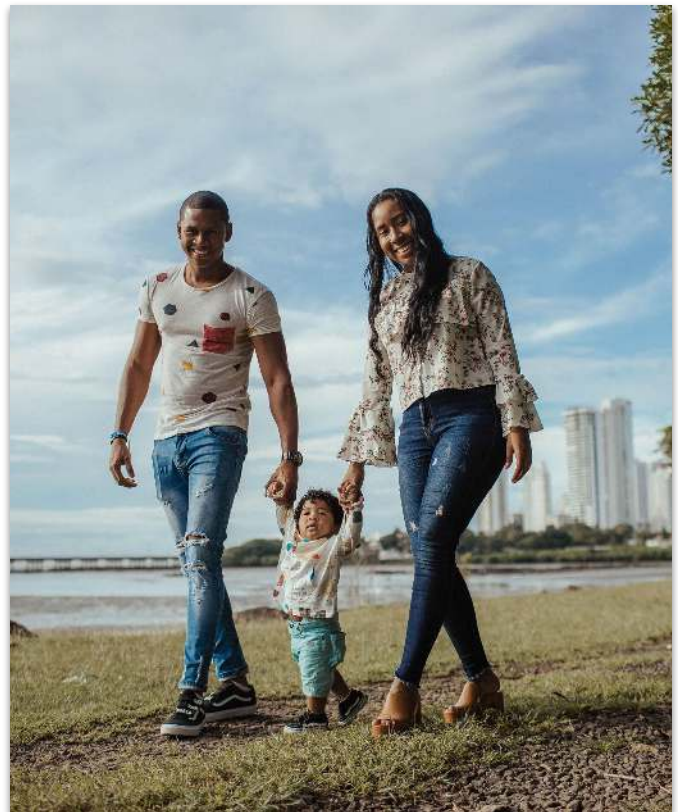
With pleading review starting at \$150, The Commons now offers flat fee help for people who need to file or respond to dissolution petitions, modification motions, custody petitions, or who need help with a stipulated judgment.

Most new family law clients chose unbundled help in 2020 and saved an estimated \$65,000 during the first nine months of the program.

Before offering unbundled services, we researched how to do it most effectively, then explained our process in a whitepaper to share what we learned with other practitioners.

To support clients through the unbundled program, we [launched a new blog, explainer video series, and CommonSense e-book legal guides](#) educate users about the legal process.

Our website allows visitors to determine what Tier they qualify for and what the cost of legal services will be, whether unbundled or traditional full-scope representation.



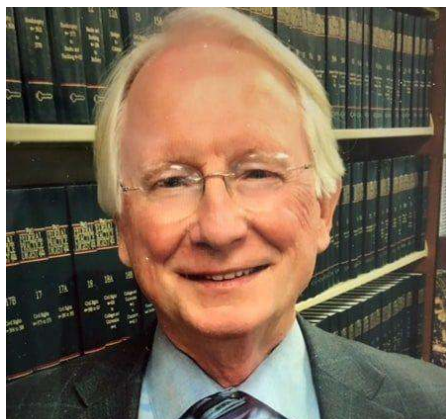
In December 2020, our team's reflections about the access to justice challenges facing litigants in family court - and our suggestions about what lawyers and judges can do to help - was [published by the Oregon State Bar Family Law Section](#).

[Domestic violence survivors made up 43% of our family law clients last year.](#) Abusers use the legal system to perpetuate abuse, making their cases harder and more expensive to resolve.

[Immigrants and people of color represented 24% of The Commons family law clients in 2020.](#)

Meet the TEAM

The Commons started 2020 with three staff and ended with seven to meet client needs.



Family Law Director

Art Knauss, a veteran family law lawyer with 40+ years' experience, oversees the family law team.



Client Relations Manager

Esmeralda Ortega-Rojas provides a great customer experience for The Commons clients and people who need legal help and uses her fluency in Spanish to aid our Spanish speaking clients and callers.



Asset Preservation Director

Rebecca Gandy has a decade of experience in estate planning and a pre-law career in victims advocacy.



Family Law Fellow

Elise Hampton celebrated her 1-year anniversary with The Commons by having a judge say that her "level of advocacy was very sophisticated." Her first year in practice focused on serving survivors of domestic violence & building document automation software



Family Law Fellow

Monica Logan spent two years in private practice before joining The Commons to work in a mission-driven environment. Monica lives in Marion County and is helping expand the organization's service area



Estate Planning Fellow

Ekua Hackman has a passion for public service and a strong desire to help build intergenerational wealth in the Black community. She serves as chair of the Oregon Chapter of the National Bar Association, along with a half-dozen other committee roles.

LAW CLERKS

Thank you to the following students for joining The Commons in 2020!

Lucie Merwin,
Lewis & Clark Law School (JD 2020)
Kristi Skalman,
Willamette University College of Law (JD 2020)
Rachael Grey,
Lewis & Clark Law School (JD 2022)
Eden Taylor,
Lewis & Clark Law School (JD 2022)
Nick Teel,
Lewis & Clark Law School (JD 2022)
Hayley Porter,
University of Oregon School of Law (JD 2021)
Andreea Hutuleac,
University of Oregon School of Law (JD 2022)
Trent Anderson,
University of Chicago (BA 2021)
Mayra Gonzalez,
Willamette University College of Law (JD 2022)
Emma Lodge,
Lewis & Clark Law School (JD 2022)



AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENTS

Amanda Caffall received the Lewis and Clark Law School Distinguished Honors Community Spirit Award in March 2020 for her work launching The Commons Law Center.

Ekua Hackman received the Oregon New Lawyers Division Member Services Award for her work engaging and leveraging new lawyers in support of the OSB's public benefit mission.

MAJOR DONORS

Catalyst Law, LLC - \$50,000
ACTEC Foundation - \$25,000
Jack Lundeen - \$5,000
Heiling Dwyer Fernandes - \$6,500
Rounds Law Office - \$2,000
Anonymous - \$1,275
John Grant & Katie Gillespie - \$1,000
Neil Kimmelfield - \$1,000
Bonnie Serkin - \$1,000

DONORS

Hon. Cheryl Albrecht
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Aurelia Erickson
William Funk
Wendy Gerlach
Leigh Gill
Sonya Fischer
Ashley Henry
Robert Klonoff
Jeffrey Nudelman
Kimberly Pray
Robert Siebel
Stewart Sokol & Larkin, LLC
Arnold Wuhrman



THANK YOU **FOR YOUR** *SUPPORT!*



Looking Ahead

2021 Aspirations



In the upcoming year, The Commons plans to:

Expand the reach and impact of its **partnership with the African American Alliance for Homeownership** to provide twice as many African Americans with estate plans.

Hire a second new lawyer of color to better serve clients who are people of color.

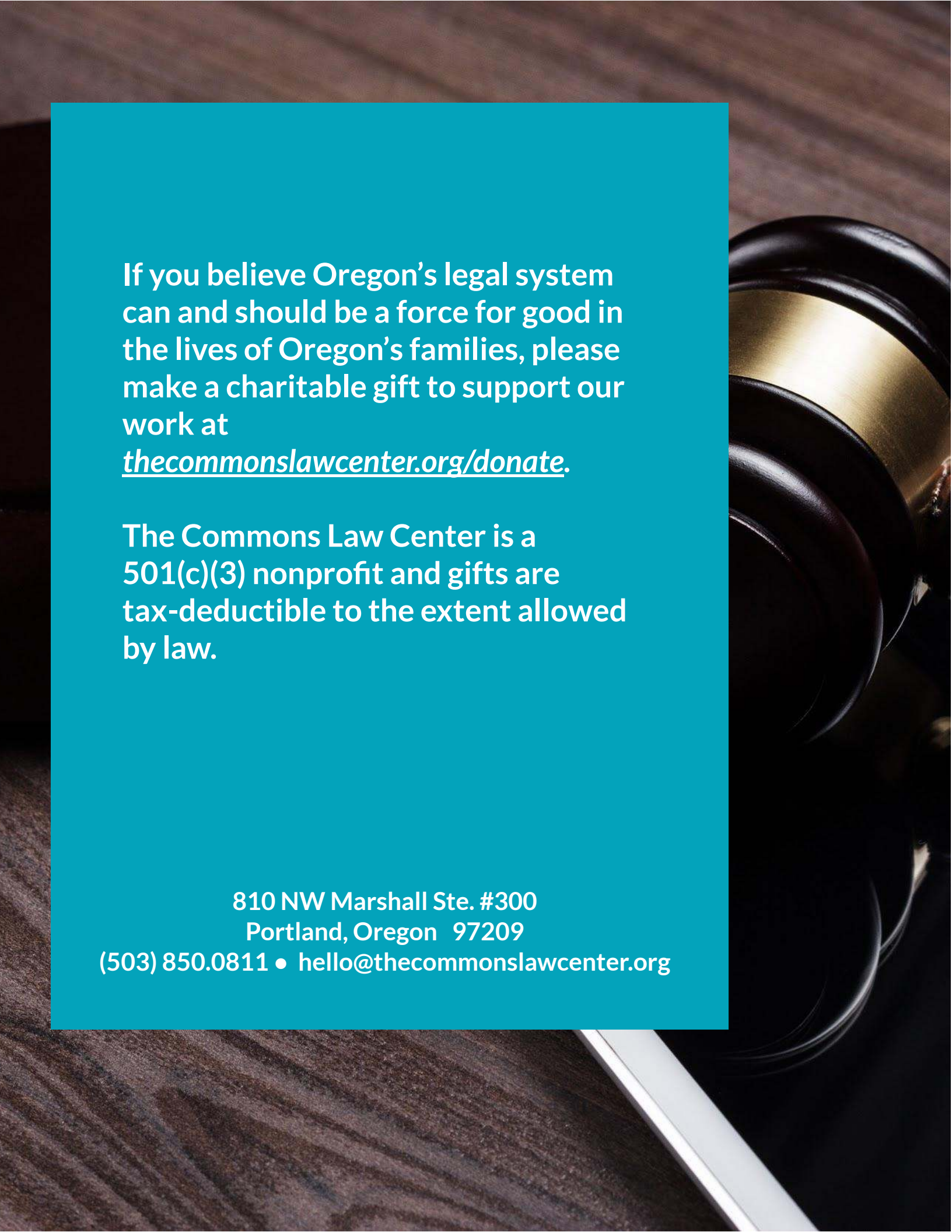
Develop partnerships that can fund comprehensive family law **services to survivors of domestic violence** who need to keep themselves and their children safe.

Build an **unbundled package** and associated educational content to **help survivors of domestic violence** with a contested restraining order hearing.

Create **unbundled estate planning packages**, including a build-out of existing document automation software to create comprehensive estate plans.

Double the number of people served last year, including through community education, unbundled legal services, and traditional full scope legal services.

Grow charitable support to meet 30% of annual operating revenue so we can refine, scale, and replicate our programs, as well as launch new, high-impact programs.



If you believe Oregon's legal system can and should be a force for good in the lives of Oregon's families, please make a charitable gift to support our work at

thecommonslawcenter.org/donate.

The Commons Law Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and gifts are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

810 NW Marshall Ste. #300
Portland, Oregon 97209
(503) 850.0811 • hello@thecommonslawcenter.org