

The Commons Law Center



The Mission

Revolutionizing access to basic legal services, information, and support for underserved people.

Why

The Commons Law Center

Most Americans – well into the middle class – lack access to even the most basic legal services. A functioning civil society requires an avenue to resolve and prevent disputes, but our legal system is out of reach for most people.

In response to this deficit, The Commons' work throughout 2022 will:

- Improve access to legal advice and representation for members of marginalized communities and legal deserts.
- Engage in preventative care, including community education, criminal record expungement, and eviction expungement.
- Leverage technology to scale existing programs and provide targeted, timely support for people's most pressing needs.
- Partner with community groups to expand our services into new geographies and new practice areas.



A former president of the Legal Services Corporation, Jim Sandman, put it well:

“It is an outrage that millions and millions of Americans, year after year, are unable to assert and vindicate their legal rights. This is the United States of America. That is wrong. We cannot let the persistence and the enormity of the access-to-justice problem anesthetize us to its human consequences, to cause us to accept the status quo ... We cannot afford to tolerate the continued degradation of justice to the detriment of the disadvantaged.”

What

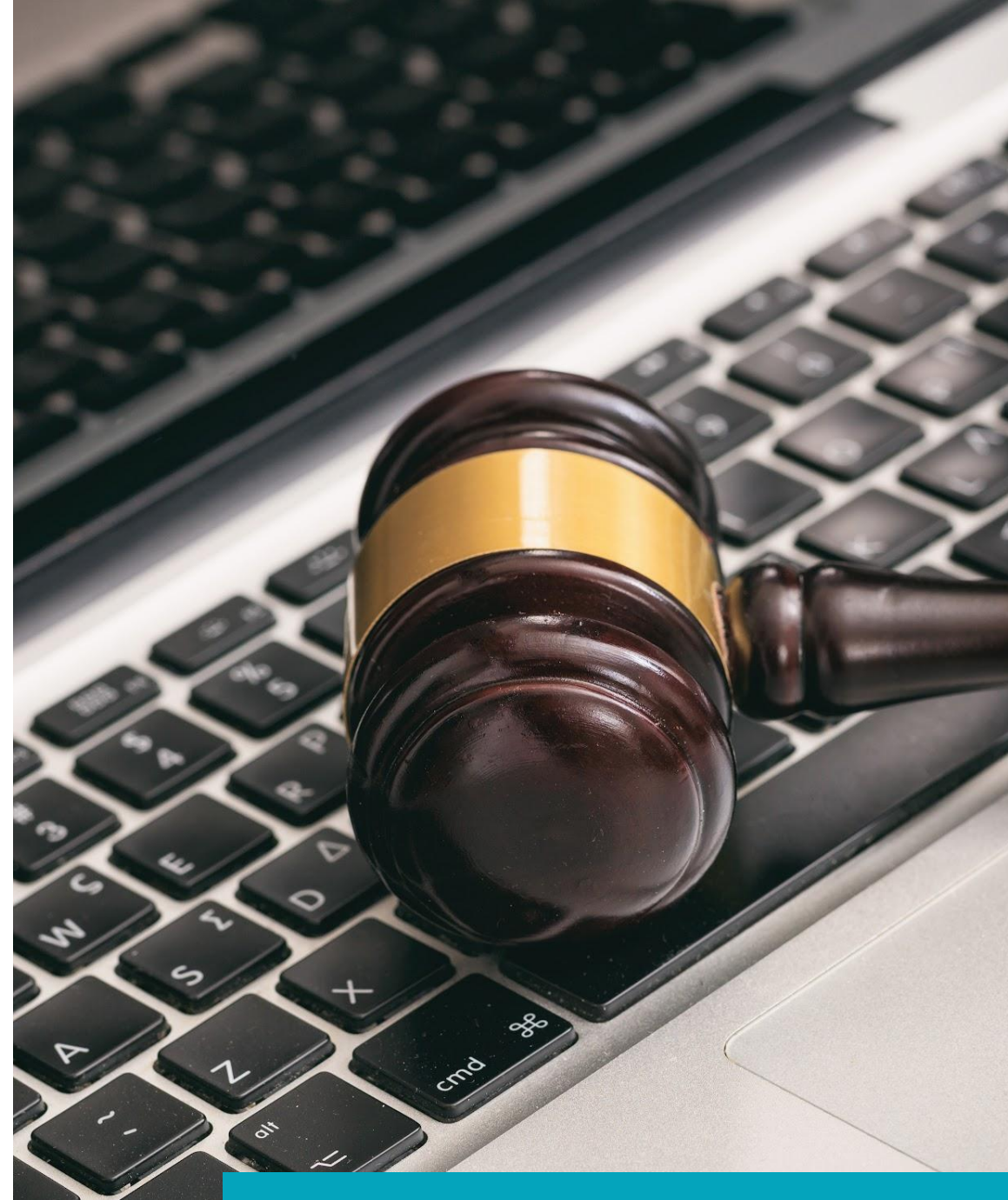
A new organizational model with innovation at its heart.

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit offering

- *Fixed fee & sliding scale legal services*
- *Practical training for emerging legal professionals*
- *Free legal information for the public*
- *Education for the legal profession about addressing access to justice*



Visit us





A Unique Approach

The Commons harnesses modern business practices, technology, and new ideas to drive the costs out of legal services delivery. With a vision to scale access, programs are designed to be independently sustained by earned revenue on below-market-rate legal fees.

Philanthropic support provides the necessary seed capital to stand-up new programs or to strategically innovate and grow what works.

The Commons delivers legal information to the public with a one-to-many approach, which allows the organization to leverage charitable gifts to create durable programs and build sustainable community assets.

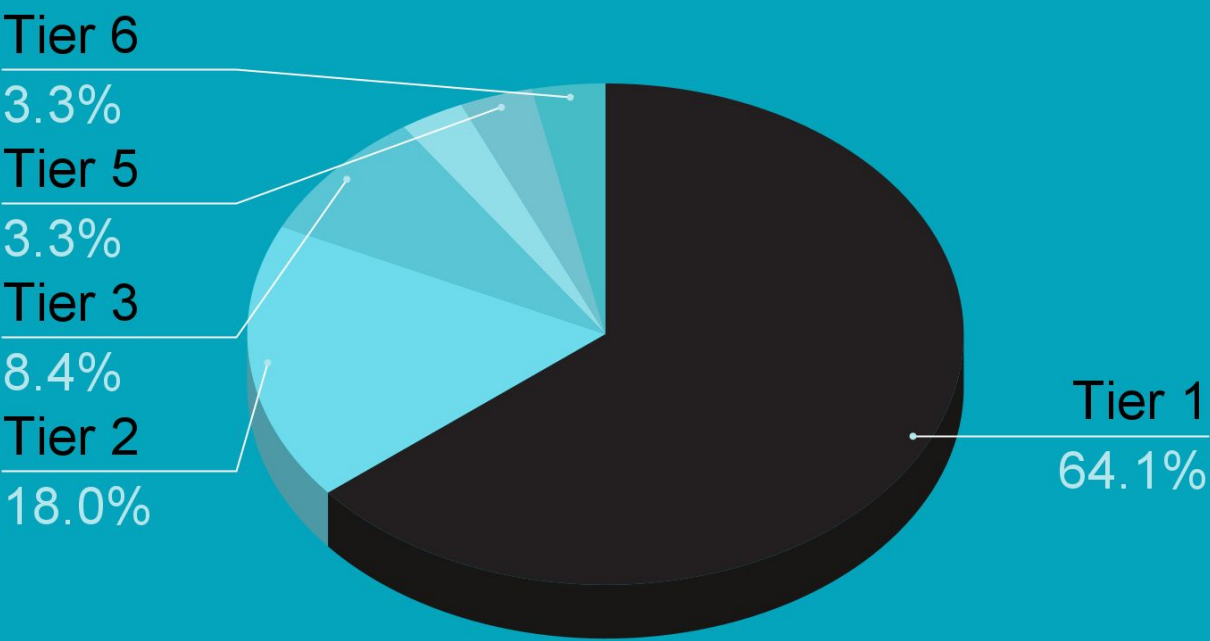
MEETING THE LEGAL NEEDS OF EVERYDAY PEOPLE

The Commons trains emerging legal professionals to work in “people law;” helping individuals handle the legal issues that affect their most basic needs. These include legal rights covering their housing, family relationships, personal safety, healthcare decisions, and ability to retain assets within family groups.

As recently as the 1970s, over 52% of U.S. lawyers focused their practices on the needs of individuals, with the rest serving business, government, and other organizations. By 2017, the people law sector had shrunk to just 25% of the marketplace, despite an overall increase in the number of practicing attorneys. Business law now dominates the profession, and what’s left of the people law sector is largely focused on wealthy clients.

The Commons Law Center provides affordable legal services to individuals with a household income below 400% of the federal poverty level. That’s over half of the total population. In doing so we empower those individuals to protect their rights, defend against injustices, and level the increasingly unequal playing field for access to legal services.

Who The Commons Serves
By Income Level in 2021



A top-down view of several people's hands reaching towards a wooden table. They are placing or adjusting large, light-colored puzzle pieces. In the center of the arrangement, one puzzle piece is a distinct reddish-brown color. The scene suggests a collaborative effort or a shared project.

Programs at The Commons



Family Law

Divorce and child custody issues are difficult and emotionally draining. The family law system is patterned on civil litigation, which is expensive, contentious, and poorly suited to people with limited assets.



In nearly 80% of Oregon family law cases, one or both parties are unrepresented by counsel.



In response, The Commons began offering sliding scale and full scope legal representation delivered through traditional hourly billing. Because most potential clients could not afford services, even at the low end of the sliding scale, The Commons created a flat fee, or unbundled, legal service program. Today, the organization continues to shift away from litigation, which is so often traumatizing for parents and children and a poor use of resources for families and courts. The Commons' fixed fee approach leverages legal information, partnerships, and streamlined systems, which helps more clients move forward in meaningful ways.

All new family law clients begin working with The Commons on a fixed fee basis.

Estate Planning

In 2019, the African American Alliance for Homeownership (AAAH) partnered with The Commons to rethink and re-invigorate its estate planning services through the Home Asset Preservation Program (HAPP). Through HAPP, The Commons helps to mitigate the history of displacement in N/NE Portland by providing longtime, low-income, largely African American homeowners who still live in the region with pro bono estate plans.

Initially funded by City of Portland as a pilot program, the City recently moved the program out of the pilot phase, expanding the program city-wide in late-2021. Last year, a dozen organizations, churches, and community groups hosted webinars that connected 200 people, including 30 who became clients, to the program.

In the Black community, **54% of wealth is tied to home equity**. Black family income in Multnomah County is generally **less than half** of that of white families.

HAPP creates greater access within the African American community to estate plans, which helps protect, create, and facilitate the transfer of intergenerational wealth.

Home Ownership & Race



60% of white households own their own homes



33% of Black households own their own homes



Tenant Eviction Defense

Ensuring that no Oregonian is preventatively displaced from their home

In 2021, **The Commons launched** its Tenant Eviction Defense program, which aims reduce the number of houseless families in Oregon by:

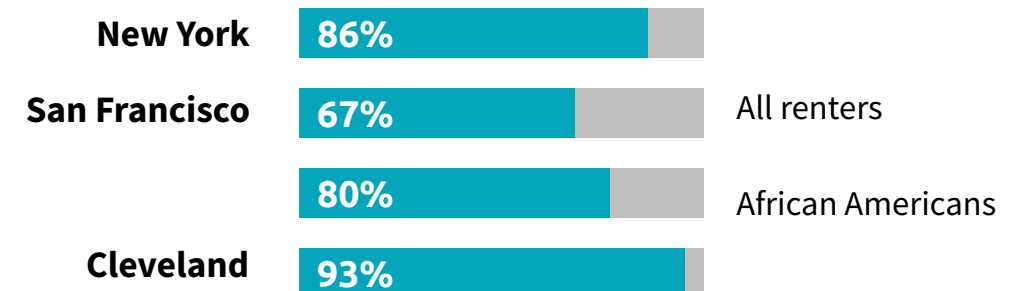
- Providing free legal services to tenants facing eviction;
- Mitigating the disparate impact of evictions on women and communities of color with culturally-specific outreach;
- Providing eviction expungement services; and
- Advancing the “right to counsel” movement in Oregon for publicly funded legal service provision for tenants facing eviction.

Cost benefit analyses found a right to counsel for tenants can save social service resources, including:

- \$320 million in New York City
- \$35.6 million in Maryland; and
- \$370.8 million in Los Angeles City and County.



Right to counsel programs in other states show why the program is so important. In states and cities that have implemented right to counsel, tenants with lawyers remained housed in the vast majority of cases, including:



Advocacy & Leadership

Decade after decade, most people go without needed legal services, which contributes to a weakened fabric of civil society. The Commons is leading the way in developing solutions to this threat.

An open-source model means sharing successes and acknowledging the organization's shortfalls. The Commons publishes scholarship, advocates for justice-advancing policies, and centers client needs in the broader conversation.

Continuing Legal Education

Access to Justice (A2J) Credit

For law firms, legal associations, and lawyer groups, The Commons offers an A2J CLE that addresses new models of expanding legal access, what we know about Oregon, and how lawyers here can help. The CLE creates an opportunity to share data, ideas, and experiences. More and deeper relationships with the legal community can facilitate mentorship and foster understanding.



Regulatory reform is a way to promote access to justice and remove barriers that increase costs and stifle innovation. The Oregon Supreme Court and Oregon State Bar are discussing issues like paralegal licensing, nonprofit lawyer referral services, and bar exam reforms, all of which impact who in society has legal services and who does not.

The Commons seeks to elevate the voices of its clients, student clerks, and fellows to foster greater understanding within the legal community.

The background of the image is a sunset or sunrise sky with soft, wispy clouds in shades of orange, pink, and blue. In the lower-left foreground, there is a dark silhouette of a hand with the index finger pointing towards the right. In the upper-middle part of the image, there is a dark, jagged silhouette of a star or a distant galaxy. A solid teal-colored horizontal bar is positioned on the left side, partially overlapping the text.

Vision For The Future

The Commons' Next Steps

The Commons has consistently proven its ability to leverage philanthropic gifts to build programs and develop community resources that improve legal outcomes for modest means populations at scale. And this is just the beginning.

With your help, The Commons can:

01.

Investment

Build program infrastructure and staff support to scale services, increase capacity to help more clients, improve client satisfaction measures, and launch new budget and performance metrics systems.

02.

Expansion

Redesign the family law program to leverage informal domestic relations trials, offer eviction and criminal expungements to all clients, and increase services provided outside the Portland-Metro area.

03.

Partnerships

Convene partnerships to help meet clients where they are, build trust, and foster relationships that lift up entire populations. Be creative supporters of underserved communities and their agendas.

04.

Innovation

Define career development pathways for fellows, including lawyers and paralegals. Advocate for policies to help expand access to legal services, such as bar exam reform and bar-licensed paralegals.

Funding Opportunity

2022

Family Law

\$200,000

Estate Planning

\$150,000

Tenant Eviction
Defense

\$150,000

Advocacy &
Leadership

\$100,000

\$600,000



An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely Seattle, featuring a large stadium with a distinctive arched roof in the background. The foreground is filled with various urban buildings, including modern glass-fronted structures and older brick buildings. A semi-transparent blue banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title text.

Who's Involved

The Team Behind The Commons

Key Staff



Amanda Caffall

Executive Director

Amanda has led The Commons from its inception. Starting as a bootstrapped part-timer wearing every possible organizational hat, today she oversees a full-time team of 6 legal professionals (and growing), alongside another 4-6 part-time student clerks and dozens of volunteer pro bono partners.



Craig Colby

Senior Advisor | Tenant Law



Riley Gombart

Estates & Operations Director



Ekua Hackman

Fellow | Estate Planning



Elise Hampton

Fellow | Family Law



Megan Van Kent

General Counsel | Tenant Eviction Defense



Kendall Spinella

Fellow | Tenant Eviction Defense



Tyler Dill

Paralegal



Emma Grace Fox

Client Relations Associate

Board Members



John Grant

President



Lewis Landerholm

Treasurer



Kimberly Pray

Secretary



Jim Dwyer

Board Member



Carlotta Alverson

Board Member



Fallon Niedrist

Board Member



Tom Brim

Board Member

Testimonials

The Commons is one place that I can send people of more modest means for thoughtful intervention in their family turmoil. The attorneys at The Commons, and their "partners" (experienced attorneys in the community who work with Commons lawyers on cases) get down to work and efficiently resolve these family conflicts.

~ **Jack Lundeen , *Attorney***

My experience working with The Commons Law Center for over a year was terrifying, frustrating, stressful, and sad, but I came away from it with a strong sense that I'd chosen the right firm to represent me. I found them to be competent, compassionate, and dedicated, and as advocates they went far beyond their responsibilities as attorneys in helping me to navigate my feelings and ensure that the legal decisions I made were in the best interests of my child.

~ **Former client**

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~***Former client***

The Commons Law Center came into my life when I was weary and emotionally exhausted from dealing with my case on my own. They came onto the scene to walk beside me through it all. From the start of our partnership I felt heard, validated and understood. They helped manage my expectations and really stood up for me when I needed it most.

~***Former client***

The Commons promotes social justice and protections for underserved communities. Low income families need fair legal representation. Marginalized populations often are "priced out" of protections through expensive legal fees. The Commons promotes equality by offering their services and is a very necessary service in our community.

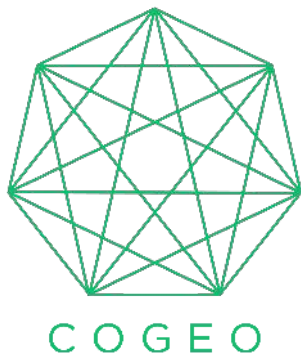
~**Barbara Nelson, *Social Justice Advocate***

PARTNERS



**Portland
Housing Bureau**

Mayor Ted Wheeler • Director Shannon Callahan



**KLEIN
MUNSINGER LLC**
ATTORNEYS





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