

The Commons Law Center

Annual Report

2022

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



From the Executive Director *Transition Letter*

You may know, the environment is my passion: I am keen on humanity persisting on Earth.

With a background in organizational development, I joined a group of creative lawyers to launch The Commons Law Center as its founding Executive Director almost seven seven years ago. We grew the organization to a million dollar budget and a dozen staff while helping thousands of Oregonians connect with legal advice, services, and resources.

Now, it's time for me to return to my passion, helping us cohabitate with nature and one another, running The Commons' tenant law program. Because childhood zip code is the greatest determinant of lifelong health, this role lets me work at the intersection of climate change and access to justice: Housing.

The team here is made up of some of the most creative, collaborative, and insightful people I know. It has been a great honor and privilege to lead them and be led by them. *It makes me extremely happy to share that our new executive director is our very own Kamron Graham!*



Kamron led our tenant law program and served as deputy director. She managed that role while President of the Oregon State Bar. She spent nearly a decade as a Public Guardian for Multnomah County, clerked for legal aid, and worked for two decades before law school with local nonprofits, effectively managing programs, multi-million budgets, and teams. She's served on more foundation and nonprofit boards of directors than anybody I know.

Kamron is perfect to lead this incredible team of people, who remove barriers for clients and would-be clients. They work beyond their pay grade, across platforms, and without silos. They translate legalese and languages. They are proactive and kind. They are in good hands.

For our team, 2022 drove home the benefits of ongoing adaptation to meet the needs of low-income Oregonians. This year, our goal is to further focus programs so we can predictably and sustainably expand legal service access.

We are incredibly grateful to our community of supporters who make what we do possible.

Thank you!

Amanda Caffall

P.S. If you have questions about past or prospective collaborations, please feel free to reach out.

Our 2022 Was A Success!

A group of creative humanitarians who are engaged in their work breed a lot of ideas. Each year, we set priorities and strategies, then adapt as we learn more and as opportunities arise.



Invest in admin and operations to develop infrastructure needed to sustainably grow. *Goal is completed!*

Finalize the redesign of our budget, financials, and performance metrics to reflect individual program costs and varied revenue streams. *Goal is completed!*



Redesign the family law program to leverage Oregon's informal domestic relations trial process, minimize the emotional labor and secondary trauma exposure required of new lawyers, and reduce client costs by providing only unbundled or flat fee services. *Goal is completed!*

Build greater awareness of our work among people who need help and entities we can collaborate with to better help those who are currently un- or underserved. *Goal is completed!*



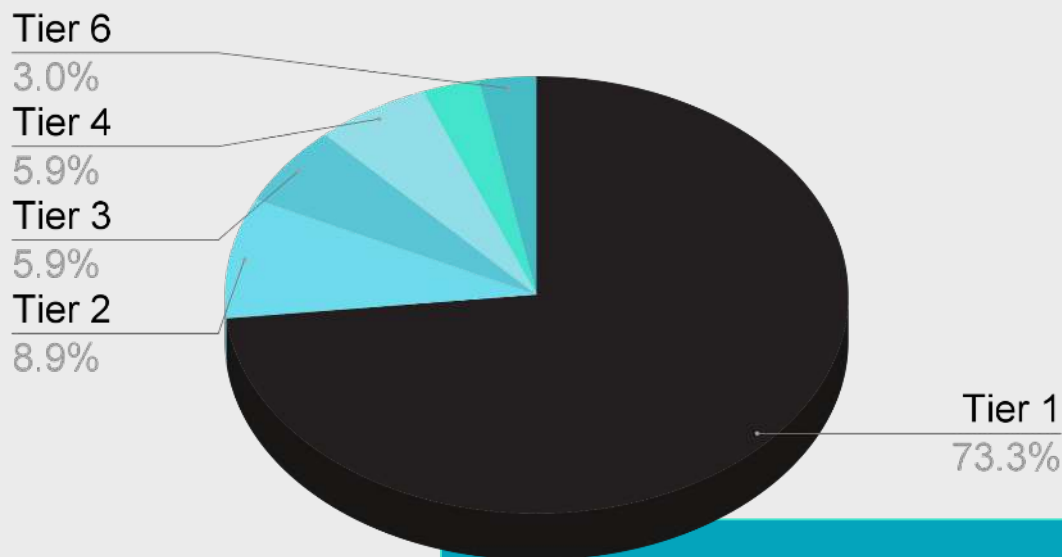
Offer expungement services to all clients for either criminal convictions or evictions. *Goal is underway!*

Define career development pathways for new lawyer and paralegal fellows. *Goal is underway!*



Who The Commons Serves

The Commons Law Center is an Oregon 501(c)(3) social enterprise that provides stabilizing civil legal services to low income people who fall below 400% of the federal poverty level. As an indicator of this population's needs, The Commons grew an average of 55% year-over-year the first five years serving clients.



2022 Client Impact

Received **11,628** phone calls from people looking for legal help

Web traffic increased by **22%** - 30,000 visits from 22,000+ unique users

Provided **6,240** legal service hours

Opened **1,720** new matters

Provided direct legal services to **547** people

Whether clients receive flat fee or hourly help, services are available on a sliding scale across six income tiers. The hourly rate for program directors is 50% of the median hourly rate for all Oregon lawyers in private practice, adjusted for inflation. The Commons' fee-for-service model supports 70% of the operating budget while expanding access to legal help.

Client Impact Stories



LM

Estate Planning

LM spent over 20 years trying to execute an estate plan using online systems.

In 2022, The Commons assisted LM in completing her estate plan using an online will program, easily guiding her through the process. The Commons' help made it possible to finalize her plan. In her words, The Commons' "skill, caring, and consideration...lifted a large weight from [my] shoulders."



MM

Family Law

MM was a referral from a domestic violence organization. She contacted The Commons because she had a court hearing coming up and needed help preparing for the hearing.

She was unable to afford full scope representation, so The Commons provided her with a brief coaching session. After her session, her advocate emailed The Commons team expressing her and her client's gratitude. It was the first time MM felt heard and supported, and she was very appreciative that such resources exist. When her hearing was rescheduled by the court and she had more time to prepare, MM called back to request additional coaching for her family law hearing.



BR


Tenant Eviction Defense

BR received a notice evicting him and his son from the RV they were living in. However, the eviction notice was defective. The Commons was able to leverage this defense to negotiate 1) a move-out date that he desired and could meet, 2) debt forgiveness of all pending fees the landlord claimed BR owed, and 3) dismissal of the case.

Following this agreement, however, BR woke up one morning to find his electricity was out. The RV quickly lost heat without power. This was especially difficult for him to deal with that day because he was also caring for his sick child. Suspecting it was the landlord, BR contacted his Commons attorney who immediately called the landlord. Although the shutoff was not intentional, the attorney demanded the landlord meet their legal obligation to provide adequate power and informed them of The Commons' ability to pursue damages if the issue was not resolved immediately. After the call, BR's power came back on within the hour.

Community Impact and Recognition

Systemic change is hard. Our team chips away at it nevertheless.




Two of our new attorney fellows graduated this year. One already went on to launch a successful solo practice, handling family law and probate matters in East Multnomah County.


One of our attorney fellows spoke alongside Oregon Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden to celebrate the confirmation of Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson.

A first-of-its-kind tenant law class – a collaboration with all three Oregon law schools – started January 2023. We organized it into existence and are teaching it.


We are proud to have received recognition for our ongoing efforts in the community. In 2022:



The Commons' team was on the cover of the [Oregon State Bar Bulletin in April](#) as part of a story about how law firm culture has changed due to the pandemic.



When summer arrived, The Commons was featured on the nationally recognized [Legal Evolution blog](#) as a case study, inspiring one legal change expert to say our model is "the closest thing...in North America to a 'teaching law firm,' where students and new lawyers gain first-hand experience serving clients." ([source](#))



Fastcase 50 is a national award honoring the "law's smartest, most courageous innovators, techies, visionaries, and leaders." The Commons' 2022 executive director, Amanda Caffall, was named one of the [2022 Fastcase 50](#).

Program Highlights

Planning & Probate

The **Homeownership Asset Preservation Program (HAPP)** is a partnership project with the African American Alliance for Homeownership (AAAH). HAPP's purpose is to help mitigate the history of displacement in N/NE Portland by providing longtime, low-income, largely African American homeowners with estate plans and probate legal services free-of-charge. The City of Portland Housing Bureau renewed its contract with AAAH to support HAPP through June 2023, which supports The Commons through a sub-contract.

In 2022, The Commons closed the first HAPP-related probate. Through a testamentary trust, \$821,000 worth of real and personal property were retained as a Black family's wealth. One beneficiary set up their own estate plan with The Commons help, further supporting that wealth accumulation in future generations.

Since its launch in 2020, HAPP has delivered **29** targeted webinars to over **300** people, provided **35** families with estate plans, and is working with **26** families currently.



Program Highlights

Tenant Eviction Defense

In 2022, the **Tenant Eviction Defense program (TED)** connected more than **450** area-residents to tenants' rights information, provided more than **200** tenants a case review and consultation with an attorney, and represented 56 tenants that prevailed in court to avert eviction. In the fourth quarter alone, the capacity of the TED program increased to help **25** people avoid eviction.

Growing the ranks of practitioners available to help tenants was the rationale for two recent changes to Oregon law licensing:

- **First**, making it easier to transfer a law license from another state
- **Second**, creating a new licensed paralegal program to allow paralegals to take on some of what only lawyers have been permitted to do, limited to family and landlord/tenant law

The Commons approached Oregon's three law schools about adding a tenant law class to their curriculum. Student interest and societal need led to a first-of-its-kind collaborative course, available to students at all three law schools. The course started January 18th and is a "simulation" course, as defined by the American Bar Association. The class was immediately popular, generating a waitlist at all three schools. With the majority of students being outside the dominant culture, the class also proved to attract a diverse population.

Relative to 2019, average monthly eviction filings have increased 43% in Oregon.



Program Highlights

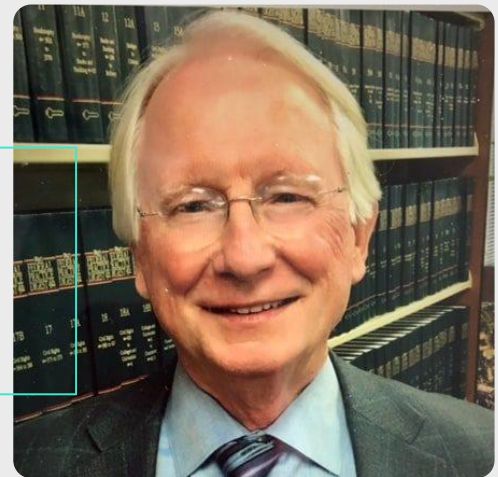
Family Law

Last year saw big changes to the family law team. Art Knauss spent more than three decades practicing family law and criminal defense. In February 2020, he joined The Commons as our first Family Law Program Director, helping train half a dozen new family law attorneys and three times as many student clerks. In October 2022, he retired for real.

Two family law fellows left The Commons in 2022. Elise Hampton completed her three-year fellowship term in November 2022 after representing more than 120 clients in court, clocking more than 3200 legal service hours, and being the first new lawyer to complete a full three-year fellowship at The Commons.

Thank you, Elise!

THANK YOU, ART – for making The Commons an intergenerational team, bringing expertise and perspective, and learning right alongside us.



Family Law - A Success Story

Kristi Skalman joined The Commons as a student law clerk in 2019, worked as a legal resident after graduating in 2020, then became an attorney fellow in early 2021. Ms. Skalman leveraged her experience with The Commons to launch her own family law practice, Vibrant Law, LLC, in March 2022 helping people in East Multnomah County with probate and family law matters.

John Grant, The Commons' Board President, recently interviewed Kristi Skalman in his Agile Attorney podcast. Check out some highlights on the following pages!

VIBRANT LAW LLC

What has been your experience running a solo practice, a year into your work?

It's going really well. I'm busy, which is great and I'm learning a lot all of the time. Even with the practice I did have previously, there's a lot to running your own business and trying to keep a vision going for a long time and not get swept up in the tides. It's a lot of balancing and ultimately I'm really happy. I love that I did this and I'm just glad that I made that choice to go solo.

Who are the communities you serve?

I think if I had to put it in a nutshell it would be people who work hard for a living here in the Portland Metro area. I do have some clients throughout rural Oregon, different parts of the state, but mostly it's lower middle class to middle class people, and then I do have a portion of my practice that represents low income people and also, specifically, people who have dealt with domestic violence issues.

How did you become involved with The Commons?

I started [at The Commons] in 2019, so I was halfway through my second year [of law school]. I had just met Amanda Caffall, the Executive Director...at a family law conference that I actually got sponsored to go to. So I met her on an off-chance after I had submitted an application two months before that. Luckily she was there, we met, and I interviewed with her and I was [at The Commons] for a few years.



What experiences were you able to get as a law clerk at The Commons?

The first thing that I remember having access to was a lot of how-tos and manuals that [The Commons] were putting together. It was great to have step-by-step guides, but I think intake was the biggest new thing that I experienced when I first started and just learning how to identify very quickly on the phone in one conversation what somebody might need and how to connect them with the appropriate services... I found it to be extremely valuable that The Commons had given me the opportunity to be that frontline, first-person that somebody calls there's a lot of trust in.

The Commons works to recruit clients to their own cause and empower them to take ownership of their legal issues. Do you feel like you learned this skill at The Commons or elsewhere?

Yes and I think by virtue of The Commons representing low income people, it's necessary that you act as a team with the client just to reduce legal fees. [When] you're trying to keep legal fees affordable, it's a hundred percent necessary to have the client be the one doing the leg work, like drafting their own documents.

We think it's important training for our fellows to learn how to run a profitable business, not just a business. Vibrant Law is obviously not a nonprofit. You have a very public service mission, but you're still trying to make a living and succeed. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Yes, surprisingly I still have a hard time believing that this is working, that my practice is real and it's working and I'm surviving off of it that's always been my dream but it's a fact that it's happening and it's because I've had training in not just running the business but also how to practice law.

...

[My experience with The Commons included] going to trials, not just drafting things which are very important, but lots of learning what the rules are of the courts. A lot of new lawyers don't get to just go to court on a full divorce trial in their first year or deal with an immediate danger order hearing. I needed that real practice and I don't think it would have been smart of me to even try to open a firm had I not had that experience that I got at The Commons.

Hopefully, even though you were being put into relatively complex situations, you felt like you had sort of the support in the structure and The Commons was behind you to be able to do that effectively.

Yes, I think one of the skills that The Commons has, that Amanda specifically has, is identifying the strength and people and also what your desired goals are for practicing law and what kind of lawyer you want to be. She was really good at matching people up so as not to give you too much. I can't say we were never working a little too hard because it's a nonprofit. There's a high demand and that was just kind of the name of the game.

I can't recommend working with The Commons enough. I just have to say it again: if you have the opportunity to work with The Commons, to clerk with them or to start your practice there first, you'll feel good about yourself at the end of the day because of the people that you're helping and you're also being taken care of in a way that the legal field isn't particularly good at for new lawyers.

What thoughts or advice would you give other new lawyers or maybe law students who want to have a public interest career but also eventually want to have their own law practice?

Take risks and that's opposite of everything you're learning in law school but you can never really grow if you don't take a risk and take a chance. If you want to open your own practice some day, do it. Take that first step and your other foot will follow and eventually you will get there.

A Look Ahead

2023 Aspirations

As we enter 2023, The Commons is working to:

Expand online educational materials, especially videos, to explain complex legal topics

Meet potential clients where there are by taking legal services and information to them

Develop training rubrics to streamline practitioner training

Invest in communications training for staff to better equip them for hard conversations with people experiencing hardships day after day

Make measurable progress toward market-rate salaries for staff and paid law clerks

Meet the Team

We're growing!



Parsa Aghel

Paralegal | Tenant Law
Languages: Farsi, Spanish



Amanda Caffall (she/her)

Tenant Law & Deputy Director



Emily Clark Cuellar (she/her)

Staff Attorney | Family Law



Craig Colby

Senior Advisor | Tenant Law



Michael Della Paolera (he/him)

Attorney Fellow | Family Law



Tyler Dill (he/him)

Senior Paralegal



Riley Gombart (he/him)

Estates & Probate Director



Emma Grace Fox (she/they)

Education & Outreach Coordinator
Languages: Spanish



Kamron Graham (she/her)

Executive Director



Ekua Hackman (she/her)

Attorney Fellow | Estates & Probate



Misty Nunez (she/her)

Client Relations Manager
Languages: Spanish



Jake Parker (they/them)

Attorney Fellow | Tenant Law



Kristina Ray (she/her)

Operations Manager



Monica Tran (she/her)

Client Relations Associate
Languages: Techow Chinese



Christine Zenthoefer (she/her)

Family Law Program Director

*Thank you to the following students for joining
The Commons Law Center in 2022:*

Krystal Avalos Rosas (she/her) – University of Oregon (undergrad)

Joy Doane (she/her) – Lewis & Clark Law

Brian Eno (he/him) – Willamette Law

Tristan Kelly (he/him) – Willamette Law

Jack Marshcke (he/him) – Lewis & Clark Law

Ruben McGill (she/her) – Seattle University Law

Orly Meyer (she/her) – Wesleyan

Melanie Rivas (she/her) – Willamette Law

Amy Subach (she/her) – Lewis & Clark Law

Thank you to our supporters who make our work possible!

Four foundations supported our work in 2022, illustrating The Commons' effectiveness and the continued need to close the access to justice gap.

- Oregon Consumer Justice | \$100,000
- Oregon Community Foundation | \$40,000
- ACTEC Foundation | \$10,000
- Henry Lea Hillman Jr. Foundation | \$10,000

Major Donors (\$1,000 +)

Organizations

- Bridge City Law
- Business Litigation Section of the OSB
- Construction Law Section of the OSB
- Consumer Law Section of the OSB
- Gaylord-Eyerma Family Fund of the Oregon Community Foundation
- Jack Lundeen Fund of Oregon Community Foundation
- Margolin Family Law
- Murphy Gary Family Fund
- Nonprofit Org Law Section of the OSB
- Pacific Cascades Family Law
- Rounds Law Office
- Securities Regulations Section of the OSB

Individuals

- Toni Blair Garrett
- Tom Brim
- Anonymous
- Neil Kimmelfield
- Alison Lackey
- Goran Matijasevic
- Bonnie Serkin

Donors (\$999 and below)

Organizations

- American Online Giving Foundation
- Consortium For Access to Justice
- Diversity Law Section of the OSB
- Elder Law Section of the OSB
- Miller Insurance Law
- Sustainable Future Section of the OSB
- Technology Law Section of the OSB
- Wool Landon
- Workers Comp Section of the OSB
- Wyse Kadish LLP

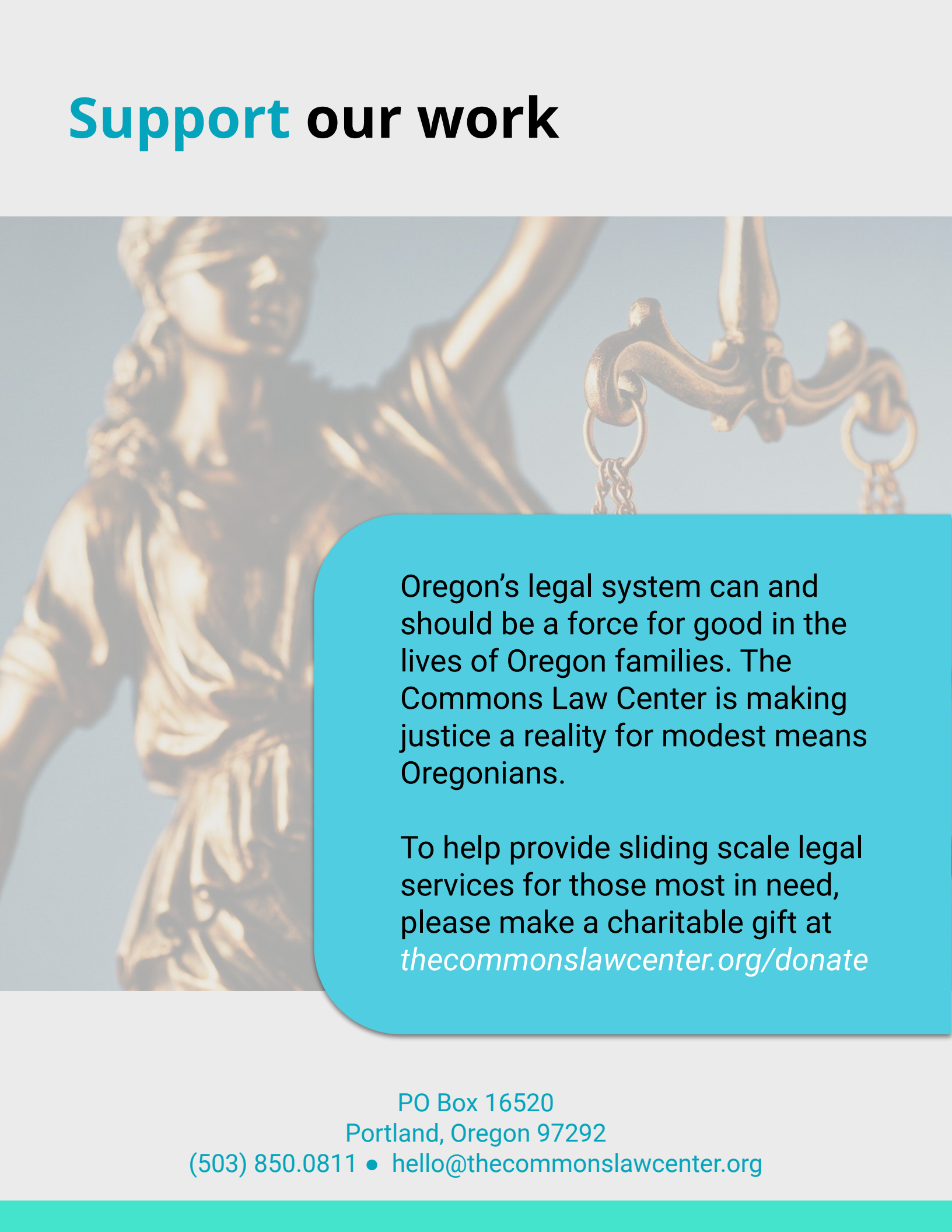
Individuals

- Amy Blumenberg
- Lori Bonnevier
- Chris Costantino
- Rick Delhommer
- Alexandra Devendra
- Sarah Einowski
- Ayla Ercin
- Sonya Fischer
- William Funk
- Jordan Furlong
- Wendy Gerlach

Donors (continued)

- John Grant & Katie Gillespie
- Steven Goldberg
- Tory Hines
- Theresa Hollis
- Jay Hull
- Robert Kusel
- Ann Ledgerwood
- Ian Macleod
- Susan Mandiberg
- Kendra Matthews
- Christopher Mertens
- Eve Miller
- Glenn Montgomery
- Peggy Nagae
- K.R. Olsen
- Joshua Ottosen
- John Parry
- Elizabeth Savage
- Linda Scher
- Trevor Schorey
- Robert Seibel
- Charles Smith
- Robin Smith
- Lauren Wallace
- Judson Wesnousky
- Steve Yates

Support our work



Oregon's legal system can and should be a force for good in the lives of Oregon families. The Commons Law Center is making justice a reality for modest means Oregonians.

To help provide sliding scale legal services for those most in need, please make a charitable gift at thecommonslawcenter.org/donate

PO Box 16520
Portland, Oregon 97292
(503) 850.0811 • hello@thecommonslawcenter.org