

The background features a series of concentric, hand-drawn circles in a light blue-grey color on a cream-colored background. A horizontal banner with a rough, brushstroke-like texture in shades of teal and turquoise is positioned across the middle. The text 'The Commons' is written in a large, black, serif font on the banner, and 'Law Center' is written below it in the same font but outside the banner.

The Commons Law Center

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

The Need

Most people – 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. Most people fall into the gap between qualifying for Legal Aid Services and being able to afford private bar legal services.

In response to this deficit, The Commons Law Center's work throughout 2023 will:

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

This statement from former president of the Legal Services Corporation, Jim Sandman, continues to be true:

"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."

The Solution

An innovative organizational model with a community focus at its core.

A 501(c)(3) social enterprise 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 to learn more](#)





An Innovative Approach

The Commons harnesses modern business practices, technology, and product offerings to make legal services more efficient and affordable. With a vision to scale access, The Commons has designed its programs 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 also leverages charitable gifts to deliver public legal information and self-help training with a one-to-many approach. This allows us to leverage charitable gifts to create durable programs and build sustainable community assets.

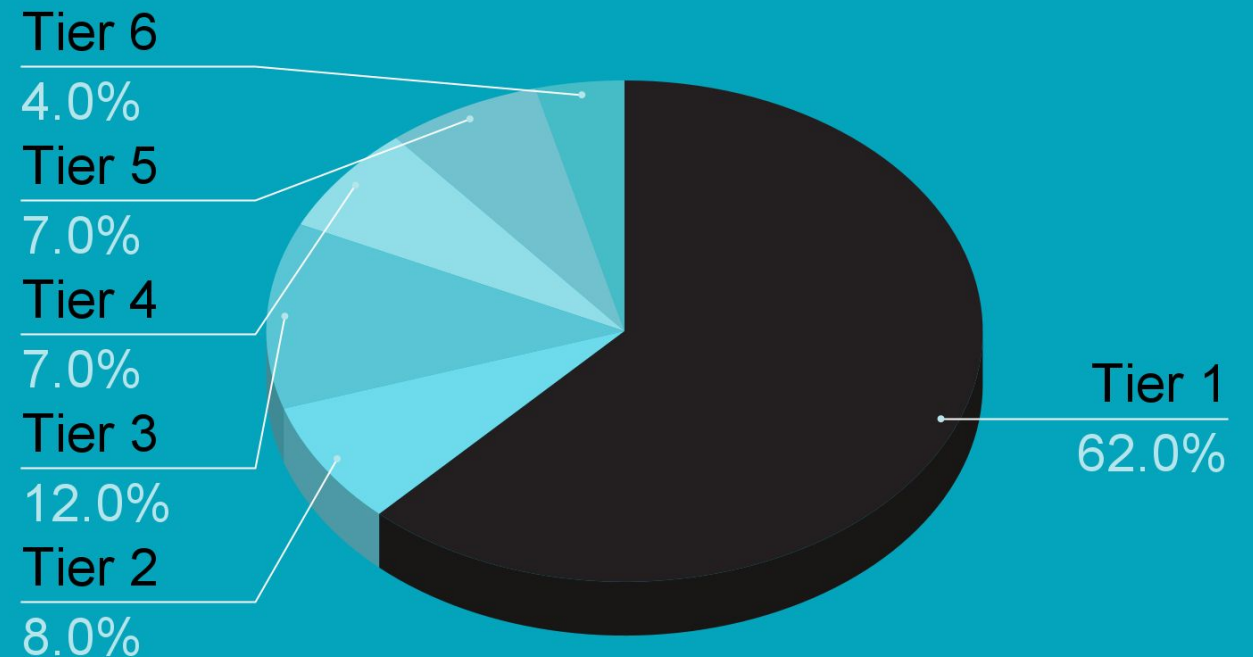
Meeting the Legal Needs of Everyday People

The Commons trains emerging legal professionals to work in “the people’s 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 The Commons empowers 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 2022



A group of hands of various skin tones are stacked in a circle, resting on a green grassy surface. A teal-colored spiral graphic is overlaid on the image, starting from the center and expanding outwards. The text "Programs at The Commons" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

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 addition to fixed fee and sliding scale legal services, the organization launched its family law coaching program, which is aimed at providing targeted, affordable legal services. Launching this program involved a lot of behind the scenes projects and tasks to create tools for clients to help them navigate the family court system on their own. The Commons is continuing to build these collateral materials to support the program while also continuing serving clients. Clients receiving coaching services report feeling empowered and relieved as they are made aware of their legal rights and also provided reassurances that they can get a divorce or establish custody without spending thousands of dollars on a lawyer.

The family law program is strengthening partnerships with existing community partners in new communities. The Commons created a **formal referral system** for a domestic violence organization in Central Oregon and have been able to assist numerous survivors of domestic violence through that partnership.

Estate Planning

The Commons is continuing its partnership with the African American Alliance for Homeownership (AAAH) to rethink and reinvigorate 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 the 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, over a dozen organizations, churches, and community groups hosted webinars that connected 200 people, including 30 who became clients, to the program.

Recognition

*The Commons updated its internal form for the Oregon Small Estate Affidavit filing. The court noted that it was a **significant improvement** over most SEA filings for its **ease of reading** and **ensuring compliance** with the requirements of the filing.*



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

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.

Tenant Eviction Defense

Ensuring that no one is preventatively displaced from their home

In 2022, The Commons continued to grow its Tenant Eviction Defense program, which aims reduce the number of houseless families in Oregon by:

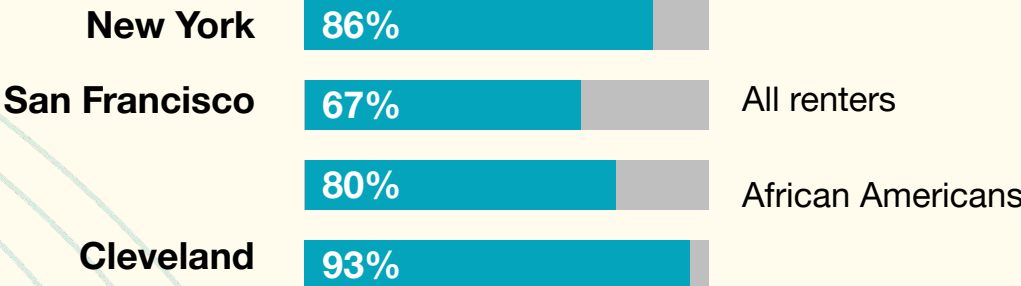
- Providing full representation for FED (forcible entry and detainer) cases statewide;
- Offering free legal services to tenants facing eviction;
- Identifying and providing legal services for habitability issues that make renter's living areas unsafe;
- Mitigating the disparate impact of evictions on women and communities of color with culturally-specific outreach;
- Providing services that mitigate impact of eviction for non-payment of rent due to lack of rental assistance funds;
- Attending First Appearances in Washington and Clackamas County to provide brief legal advice to tenants appearing pro se;
- Developing a tenant "warm line" in a partnership with Linn County Law Library; 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

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



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.

Licenses Paralegals

As of 2023, the Oregon Supreme Court and Oregon State Bar approved an innovative program to create a new type of legal professional in Oregon, the Licensed Paralegal. Much like Nurse Practitioners and Physician's Assistants in medicine, licensed paralegals will be authorized to engage in limited scope legal practice in certain family law and landlord-tenant matters.

The Commons is already working with its existing paralegals to ensure they gain the required experience for the license at The Commons. On a larger scale, The Commons is collaborating with its partners at Portland Community College and elsewhere to become a training ground for newly credentialed paralegals throughout the state.

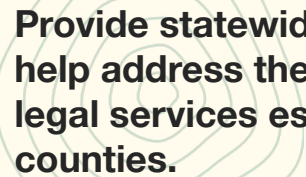
Vision For The Future




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.

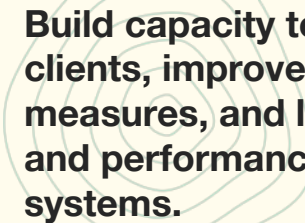
With your help, The Commons can:



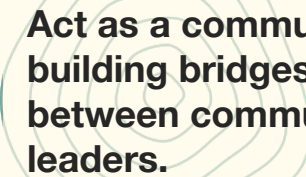
Provide statewide services and help address the growing lack of legal services especially in rural counties.



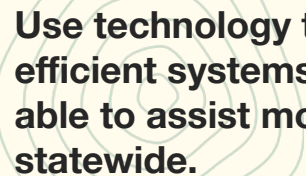
Increase program infrastructure and staff support to scale services.



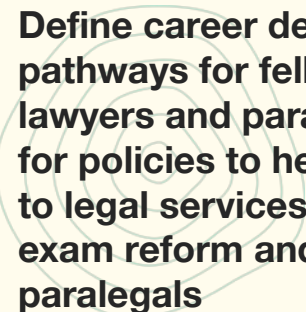
Build capacity to help more clients, improve client satisfaction measures, and launch new budget and performance metrics systems.



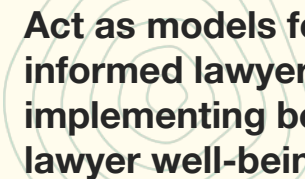
Act as a community leader, building bridges and relationships between community partners and leaders.



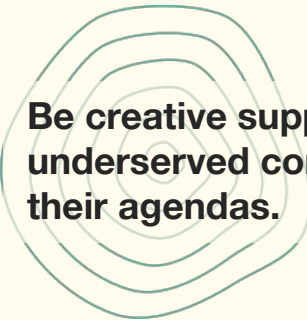
Use technology to build more efficient systems of intake and be able to assist more people statewide.



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



Act as models for use of trauma informed lawyering and implementing best practices for lawyer well-being.



Be creative supporters of underserved communities and their agendas.

Funding Opportunity

2023



An aerial photograph of a city, likely Seattle, showing a dense urban landscape with various buildings, streets, and green spaces. In the background, a large bridge with a distinctive arch structure is visible. Overlaid on the image are several concentric, light green circles that create a ripple effect across the cityscape.

Who's Involved

The Team Behind The Commons

Key Staff



Kamron Graham
(She/Her)

Executive Director



Amanda Caffall
(She/Her)

*Tenant Law & Deputy
Director*



Craig Colby
(He/Him)

*Senior Advisor |
Tenant Law*



Riley Gombart
(He/Him)

*Planning & Probate
Director*



Kristina Ray
(She/Her)

Operations Manager



Misty Nunez
(She/Her)

*Client Relations
Manager*



Tyler Dill
(He/Him)

Senior Paralegal



Emma Grace Fox
(She/They)

*Education & Outreach
Coordinator*



Parsa Aghel
(He/Him)

Paralegal | Tenant Law



Emily Clark Cuellar
(She/Her)

Family Law Staff Attorney



Michael Della Paolera
(He/Him)

*Attorney Fellow |
Family Law*



Jake Parker
(They/Them)

*Attorney Fellow |
Tenant Law*



Monica Tran
(She/Her)

Client Relations Associate



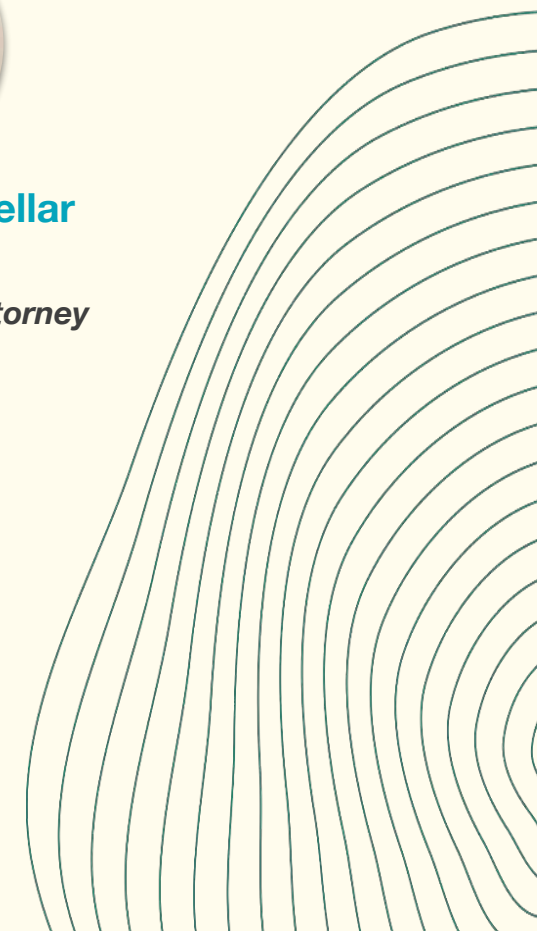
Christine Zenthoefer
(She/Her)

Fellow | Family Law



Ekua Hackman
(She/Her)

*Attorney Fellow |
Planning & Probate*



Board Members



John Grant

President



Kimberly Pray

Treasurer



Lewis Landerholm

Board Member



Jim Dwyer

Board Member



Fallon Niedrist

Board Member



Tom Brim

Board Member

Testimonials

Client A's case was found by looking through the courts' eviction cases. Her landlord had served her with a defective notice. Due to being partially hampered by the time and resource requirements of caring for her gravely ill mother, she was only able to acquire the necessary funds after the notice period had passed. In representing Client A, we levered our legal defense in the case to negotiate a payment plan that worked with her circumstances. The Commons' assistance allowed Client A to feel much more confident in communicating with her landlord.

Client B approached The Commons after her previous attorney had led her down an impossible path. They had encouraged her to pursue a custody modification that she had no chance of winning, all while charging her hefty fees for a nominal service and the opposing parties' attorney fees on top. The Commons attorney assigned to Client B was able to negotiate a settlement where she could dismiss her matter, retain the parenting time that she had, and not be responsible for the attorney fees. Although the final outcome was not what she had hoped for, she ultimately felt like The Commons alleviated the terrible situation that her previous attorney had left her in.

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.

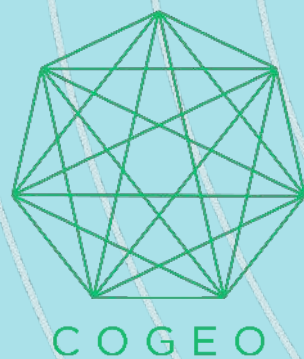
~ Jack Lundeen, *Attorney*

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*

After **Client C** spent over 20 years trying to execute an estate plan using online systems, she requested The Commons' estate planning services. The Commons assisted Client C in completing her estate plan using an online will program, guiding her through the often nuanced and detail-specific process. Through the support The Commons provided, Client C was able to finalize her plan. In her words, The Commons' "skill, caring, and consideration...lifted a large weight from [my] shoulders."

Our Partners





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