**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- **mission** ............................................................... 2
- **letter from the executive director and board chairs** ................................................ 3
- **advocacy victories** ............................................. 4
  - financial security .............................................. 5
  - economic justice ............................................. 6
  - food security .................................................. 6
  - joseph’s story .................................................... 9
  - yesenia’s story .................................................. 10
- **health care** .......................................................... 12
  - thaddeus’ story ................................................ 13
- **housing** .............................................................. 15
  - tenant protections ............................................ 15
  - homelessness ................................................... 15
  - affordable housing .......................................... 15
- **taking it to washington** .................................... 16
- **technical assistance and training** ....................... 17
  - selected trainings ............................................ 17
  - published resources ........................................ 17
- **what our legal services partners say** .............. 18
- **pro bono partnerships** ...................................... 20
- **donors** .............................................................. 22
- **boards & financials** .......................................... 24
- **western center staff** .......................................... 26
- **save the date** .................................................... 28
- **featured artists** ................................................ 29
Our clients are Californians living in poverty – including immigrants, women and girls, communities of color, children, people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, and low-income working families.

We focus on economic justice, health care, housing, and financial security – all through the lens of racial justice. We execute our mission through impact litigation, policy advocacy, budget advocacy, and administrative advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels, as well as with consultation and training for legal service programs and community based organizations.

With offices in Los Angeles, Oakland, and Sacramento, our attorneys, advocates and staff tackle complex issues and create sweeping policy solutions on behalf of millions of low-income Californians. We help government and the private sector "do the right thing" by enforcing existing laws, creating new ones, and helping to build needed public programs.

Our attorneys and advocates are trusted to provide answers to complicated questions. Reporters and lawmakers often turn to us for guidance on important legislative, litigation and administrative issues and proposals. As a result, Western Center appeared in over 500 media stories in 2018 – from the Washington Post to the Los Angeles Times.
California has the 5th largest economy in the world. We also have the highest rate of poverty in the United States.

The year 2018 set the stage to define the true character of California now and in the future. We elected a new governor who consistently vocalizes his commitment to reducing the income and social inequality plaguing our state. We saw a noticeable increase in concern for the homelessness, housing, and clean water crises in California, and at the same time, a stronger call for health care for everyone who lives here.

At Western Center, we’ve worked for over five decades to remedy the structural failure that is poverty, and to address the racial injustices that oppress people of color. We know that in an economy as robust as ours, taking care of our most vulnerable is not only the right thing to do, it is our collective responsibility. We believe that health care, economic stability, access to justice, and housing are rights we all have as humans, which is why we continue to push innovative administrative, policy, and litigation solutions to end poverty in California.

We invite you to take a look through our 2018 Annual Report for a snapshot of our work, and we hope you feel inspired to join us as we continue the fight against poverty this year and beyond.

PAUL TEPPER, Executive Director
GRACE CARTER AND DAVE ELSON, Co-Chairs of the Board
In 2018, Western Center’s litigation and advocacy secured billions of dollars for low-income Californians and brought about policy changes that helped 13 million people.
FINANCIAL SECURITY

People experiencing poverty are people first, and they deserve opportunities and choices to reflect that. Our financial security work is an extension of that belief. We work to give more options to the people who need them most.

The largest CalWORKs grant increase in 40 years was achieved, benefiting 400,000 households, including one million kids (Budget Advocacy)

A two-year roadmap to bring one million CalWORKs kids out of “deep poverty” was adopted (Budget Advocacy)

A CalWORKs cost of living adjustment, which was eliminated in 2009, was restored (Budget Advocacy)

The state is now required to recognize electronic theft resulting from scams on Electronic Benefits Transfers (EBT) and reimburse recipients – AB 2313 (Stone)

People can now opt in/out of text messaging communications from welfare departments – AB 1957 (Berman)

Caseworkers must now have the ability to see any disabilities or domestic violence disclosed by a welfare applicant or recipient when they open the case file – AB 2030 (Limón)

Welfare overpayments caused by the welfare department may now be expunged, if they are determined uncollectable – SB 726 (Wiener)

All pregnant women and babies served by CalWORKs will now receive wellness and family support via home visiting (Budget Advocacy)

The state is now required to meet with advocates no less than quarterly to review progress on the creation of the Statewide Automated Welfare System, which will serve 13 million Californians (Budget Advocacy)

Riverside County’s General Relief Program increased 40-fold, subsequent to lawsuit (Bojorquez v. County of Riverside) Co-counsel: Inland Counties Legal Services and the Public Interest Law Project

Western Center staff served on the state-convened Lifting Children and Families Out of Poverty Task Force, which created a report detailing Recommended Strategies to Address Deep Child Poverty and Child Poverty in California (Administrative Advocacy)

Increased the Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI) by $1.8 million – a state-funded replica of Supplemental Security Income for those who don’t qualify for the federal program due to immigration status (Budget Advocacy)

Expanded eligibility for the state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to younger and older workers, and increased the value of the credit to keep pace with the increase in minimum wage. Western Center also co-sponsored the minimum wage bill (Budget Advocacy)

Welfare recipients now have access to over 14,000 ATMs, where they can access monthly aid without a surcharge (Administrative Advocacy)

A Supplemental Security Income (SSI/SSP) cost of living adjustment, which was eliminated in 2009, was restored (Budget Advocacy)

CalWORKs applicants are no longer required to be finger-imaged to be eligible for assistance (Budget Advocacy)

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LA Courts stopped from automatically suspending driver’s licenses simply because people are living in poverty (Alvarado v. Superior Court of California)

- The court, which had ordered the suspension of tens of thousands of driver’s licenses of predominately black and Latino residents for littering, jaywalking and minor traffic offenses, must now assess the actual ability of each person to make payments, and offer payment plans or other options.

The predatory money bail system was eliminated, and monetary conditions of release banned – SB 10 (Hertzberg)

Children are no longer billed for school debts – AB 1974 (Gonzalez)

Cities are required to offer payment plans for all parking tickets – AB 2544 (Lackey)

Collection agencies can no longer threaten to collect non-existent debts – AB 1526 (Kalra)

Community service is now valued at twice the minimum wage – AB 2532 (Jones-Sawyer)

Poor grades are no longer a bar for youth summer work permits – SB 1428 (McGuire)

On-line adjudication of traffic tickets pilot projects created in multiple counties (Budget Advocacy)

$90 million in virtually uncollectable juvenile detention fees were discharged by LA County (Administrative Advocacy)

Ended practice of charging parents juvenile hall/probation fees, saving low-income parents $200 million dollars (Administrative Advocacy)

Sales Tax is now defined as a “Tax,” thereby allowing low-income people to bring taxpayer suits – AB 2376 (Stone)

Over 1.2 million aged, blind, or disabled SSI recipients in California became eligible to apply for CalFresh food stamp benefits (Budget Advocacy)

Western Center led the effort to make California the first state in the country to protect families who might lose food stamp benefits when SSI recipients become eligible for SNAP (Budget Advocacy)

Thousands of families received additional CalFresh benefits, after losing food due to utility company power shut off (Administrative Advocacy)

Western Center advocacy resulted in 2,000 households in eight Northern California counties receiving $534,000 in replacement food benefits for food lost when utility companies intentionally shut down portions of the power grid in an attempt to prevent fires

Emergency food assistance was obtained for families impacted by Northern and Southern CA fires

- Thanks to Western Center sponsored legislation, California requested and received federal approval to provide emergency food assistance for thousands of low-income households impacted by the devastating Northern and Southern California fires.

Charter schools now required to provide free/subsidized meals to all low-income students – AB 1871 (Bonta)

- Unlike public schools, 20% of all charter schools were not providing needy pupils with free or reduced-price meals during each school day

Former foster youth barriers to CalFresh food assistance removed (Administrative Advocacy)

Colleges and universities can now run CalFresh Restaurant Meals Programs to address student hunger, regardless of conflicting local policies – AB 1894 (Weber)
IN HIS WORDS

JOSEPH’S STORY

Many years ago, around the time Jerry Brown was elected governor the second time, I was introduced to the world of advocacy. Due to my own circumstances, disability rights were very important to me. One of the first issues I worked on after joining a disability rights advocacy group was SSI (Supplemental Security Income). At that time, I was earning a decent pay, but I also received SSI payments for months when my health barred me from working enough to earn a living wage. I was 30 years old, and had been on SSI for most of my life.

Regular W-2 employment was something I considered myself unable to do. I was worried that if I was unable to permanently hold a W-2 job, SSI benefits would no longer be available to me if I needed it. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s recession-era cuts to SSI, and my own experiences and anxieties, prompted me to advocate on behalf of people with disabilities, especially in relation to SSI.

I was soon introduced to advocates working at Western Center on SSI issues. From the beginning, Western Center aimed to end California’s participation in the cash-out program, which barred SSI recipients from receiving food stamps. Western Center was also working to restore funding for SSI benefits from cuts that were made during the recession.

After seven years of being unable to get the California Legislature to budge on either issue, many advocates became disheartened. There was even a year when a bill to restore SSI grants passed both houses, only to be vetoed by then Governor Jerry Brown. Many advocates felt that no change would occur until after Brown’s tenure was over. Fortunately, change finally came last year, during his final year in office.

In last year’s budget negotiation process, Governor Brown agreed to end California’s participation in the cash-out program. That change will allow over one million Californians who receive SSI to become eligible for food stamps, helping ease some of the food insecurity they experience living in extreme poverty.

The end of cash-out in California was the first big win around SSI that I was a part of, and it renewed my personal resolve to see the grant restoration become reality. We are doubling down on our efforts to convince the new administration to fully restore the recession-era cuts to the state’s portion of the SSI grant amounts. This fight is of the utmost importance when it comes to California’s goal to address extreme poverty and to improve the safety net for California’s most vulnerable populations.

This battle is extremely important to me as a lifelong recipient of SSI. Many of my family members and peers use SSI income for necessities like food, warmth, and shelter. I know that SSI grants can mean the difference between life and death for people who are permanently unable to work or sustain gainful employment.

I am proud to say that I have aligned my personal advocacy efforts and this portion of my life’s work for the service of people with disabilities, and I am proud to continue my work with Western Center.”
When I graduated from Pasadena City College, I transferred to UC Davis. I thought transferring would solve many of the financial problems I faced at community college; I thought universities offered meal plans as part of their financial aid packages, but that assumption turned out to be wrong. At UC Davis, I found myself struggling to find enough money to pay for housing and food. Looking for help back home was not an option—in fact, there were many times I needed to send money home. At my lowest point, during the summer quarter of 2016, I ran into delayed financial aid problems. I was a full-time student with a part-time research job, and I had $20 in my bank account with no secure housing for the next couple of weeks. I broke down in the middle of campus and called my mother. She cried with me, and I know she felt helpless because all she could send was a couple of extra dollars. That weekend, I met up with my campus fellowship mentor and shared my frustration and anxiety with her. She immediately opened her home to me, expected nothing in return. She was a godsend.

I consider myself fortunate because I know many students don’t have someone to turn to. It shouldn’t take “fortune” for students to stop experiencing hunger. My biggest regret is not looking further into SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) during my college years; it is my hope that students experiencing hunger will have improved access and information about government assistance benefits.

Fortunately, advocates like Western Center have been working on this issue for years, and have made progress in implementing solutions. Last year, Western Center was a lead co-sponsor for AB 1894 (Weber) in California, which allows colleges and universities to run CalFresh Restaurant Meals Programs to address student hunger.

The passage of AB 1894 built on the previous four years of policy victories in the area. The first was AB 1930 (Skinner) in 2014, which required the California Department of Social Services to identify which student jobs could be considered training programs, so they could be exempt from the student work rule that prohibited receipt of SNAP benefits.

Western Center’s continued commitment to fighting for increased funding for this work will have a significant impact for students across the state, and serves as a model for ways other states can address student hunger.
At Western Center, we believe access to health care is a human right. We work to preserve and expand access to health care for all Californians — regardless of immigration status, age, or health conditions.

California’s Medi-Cal expansion for hundreds of thousands of low-income adults was protected against threatened backdoor federal cuts – SB 1108 (Hernandez)

Access to health care services for millions of children was improved – SB 1287 (Hernandez)

Millions of dollars in hospital charitable care services were preserved in Fresno and LA (Administrative Advocacy)

San Diego and Orange Counties fixed their flawed Medi-Cal renewal process (Administrative Advocacy)

Western Center guidance improved health services in 58 counties for working-disabled households (Administrative Advocacy)

LA County stopped an illegal practice that resulted in 30,000 Medi-Cal recipients losing coverage (Moncrief v. County of Los Angeles) Co-counsel: Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County and Kirkland & Ellis

Los Angeles County was required to identify and help thousands of mentally ill General Relief applicants (Housing Works v. County of Los Angeles) Co-counsel: Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Disability Rights Legal Center, and Morrison & Foester.
Thaddeus Moncrief has been in a wheelchair since 1989. That was also when he first got on disability, and when he acquired Medi-Cal. In the three decades since, Mr. Moncrief’s interactions with the Medi-Cal system were mostly straightforward, and issues were resolved relatively quickly. That changed in 2016, when he found himself unexpectedly removed from the Medi-Cal rolls without explanation.

I was trying to order some medicine, and I was trying to get a new prescription, and they said it was coming up that I was terminated from Medi-Cal. Then I noticed on the 3rd of the month, when I usually get my Medi-Cal funding, it didn’t show up. When I called someone at the office, they said all of my Medi-Cal and everything had been cancelled. I didn’t get a letter or receive a phone call or any of that.

Mr. Moncrief had been on Medi-Cal for a long time, and was well aware of the renewal process. So when the time came for him to submit his paperwork in 2016, he did — in May. To his surprise, he learned that he had been dropped from Medi-Cal at a doctor’s appointment in July.

I couldn’t see the doctor, I needed repairs on my wheelchair, and it was really breaking me down. It seemed like other people must be going through it too because when I would call, the phone would ring for a long time — I couldn’t get through to anyone. When I finally reached the operator, he said there was a high volume of calls coming in, and the number he directed me to then said it was the wrong department. Sometimes it was two or three days before they even answered the phone. I didn’t know what to do.

Once Mr. Moncrief was made aware of the issue, he had a hard time getting into contact with anyone from the County who could help. Eventually, he was sent another renewal packet, which he filled out and returned. But by September when he sought legal help, his Medi-Cal still wasn’t reinstated. Within a few days of being contacted by NLSLA, the County restored Mr. Moncrief’s Medi-Cal.

I was surprised at how easy it was for them to just cut you off without explaining anything. I had been on for almost 20 years or so, and it was so easy for them to just drop me like that. My paperwork says that I’m fully disabled, they know I’m fully dependent, and for me to not even get a call, or show any concern, I felt a certain way about that. That’s when I really felt like I must not be important — people must really not be important… If I did something wrong let me know so I can correct it or get it in.

Mr. Moncrief was one of over 30,000 individuals in Los Angeles County who were removed from Medi-Cal rolls because of a paperwork backlog. Western Center and our partners at Neighborhood Legal Services Los Angeles County (NLSLA) and Kirkland and Ellis filed suit against the County for the unlawful removals, as well as for failing to restore Medi-Cal eligibility during the 90-day cure period.

The action by Western Center and our partners not only cemented the restoration of Mr. Moncrief’s coverage, it also resulted in a legal win requiring Los Angeles County to address the backlog, and ensure that no one is illegally removed from Medi-Cal in the future. The judge in the case, Hon. James Chalfant, said of the situation, the “termination system is more than a mistake; it is an institutional failure.”

For his part, Mr. Moncrief is glad he sought legal help, not just for himself, but also for others who were affected by the County’s negligence.

I felt like, if I’m going through this and they treat me this way, what about the people who are elderly and worse off than I am? This could cause somebody to lose their life. If it wasn’t for y’all, I truly don’t know what kind of situation I would be in. Everybody deserves to be treated like a human — not just a number.
HOUSING

We seek to ensure that ALL Californians have access to healthy, sustainable and affordable housing in neighborhoods of their choosing, and we advocate for strong, clear, and enforceable anti-displacement protections.

TENANT PROTECTIONS

Tenants have increased notice and more time to respond in eviction lawsuits – AB 2343 (Chiu)

Landlords may not refuse to accept payments from third parties, such as tenants’ family members or nonprofit agencies – AB 2219 (Ting)

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Enacted obligation to Affirmatively Further Fair Housing (AFFH) in California law and require local governments to do an AFFH analysis as part of their housing elements – AB 686 (Santiago)

$500 million was secured in new money for housing and homeless programs (Budget Advocacy)

Corrected appellate court decision to make affordable housing planning requirements applicable to charter cities – SB 1333 (Wieckowski)

Affordable housing now mandated for wealthier communities – AB 1771 (Bloom)

Court staff educated on new unlawful detainer masking rules to protect tenants (Administrative Advocacy)

In-depth advocacy to assist the state in implementing an unprecedented 2017 package of 15 housing bills that create a pathway for significant increases in affordable housing (Administrative Advocacy)

HOMELESSNESS

Temporary Homeless Assistance Program grants increased from $65 a day to $85 a day for individuals, and from $125 a day to $145 a day for families (Budget Advocacy)

Secured $24 million in increased funding in the 2018-2019 budget, plus an additional $24 million in funding in the 2019-20 budget, for the state’s rapid rehousing program – bringing total funding for the state’s Housing Support Program to $95 million. Also secured up to $15 million for a new rapid rehousing program for seniors (Budget Advocacy)

Evicted residents of Costa Mesa received $900,000 and the city agreed to build new affordable housing (Dadey v. Costa Mesa and Kennedy Commission v. City of Costa Mesa) Co-counsel: Bird Marella, Public Law Center, Legal Aid Society of Orange County, Haynes and Boone, and The Public Interest Law Project

Corrected a court decision undermining the creation of affordable housing in coastal areas – AB 2797 (Bloom)
Western Center submitted comments in opposition to the Trump Administration’s proposed changes to federal Public Charge rules, which threaten millions of immigrants (Administrative Advocacy)

A California Fair Housing schema was created, replacing gutted federal rules – AB 686 (Santiago)

Western Center led the fight against federal attacks on food stamps (SNAP/CalFresh) in the Farm Bill, which impacts millions of Californians; cuts were thwarted (Policy Advocacy)
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND TRAINING

Western Center attorneys and advocates provided help to hundreds of legal services attorneys and advocates throughout California, including 88 trainings, 94 publications and over 800 one-to-one technical assistance sessions.

SELECTED TRAININGS

2018 Health Summit
Over 40 health policy advocates met in Sacramento to discuss significant policy changes, examine the future of health care in California, and plan for work in the upcoming year.

Bay Area Training Day
65 attorneys and law clerks from 13 legal aid organizations learned from Western Center experts about drafting complaints, declarations, handling depositions, and injunctive relief.

Los Angeles Training Day
Attended by over 70 attorneys and law clerks from 12 legal services organizations.

The 2018 Western Center/California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation Housing Summit
Over 80 legal services attorneys and housing advocates from around the state gathered in Sacramento to discuss new policy changes, challenges and successes from 2018, and worked together to identify priorities for 2019 housing initiatives and activities.

PUBLISHED RESOURCES

The Problem with Probation: A Study of the Racial and Economic Impact of Probation Fees in California
Back to Basics: Food & Fairness for Students in Public Charter Schools
CalWORKs 101: An overview of cash aid for low-income California families
Deep Poverty and Unmet Basic Needs
WHAT OUR LEGAL SERVICES PARTNERS SAY

“Thanks for all your great work on the regulations! They will make a huge difference for people in California, especially if the Trump administration gets to make all the changes they want in the federal regulations.”
SCOTT CHANG  Director of Litigation at Housing Rights Center

“Western Center plays an essential role in my tenants’ rights advocacy work. Your assistance in the form of legal updates, analyzing new legislation, and strategizing difficult legal issues has had an immense impact on my development as a lawyer and on the outcomes I am able to achieve for my clients. Thank you for all that you do!”
LAUREN DEMARTINI  Housing Law Staff Attorney at Bay Area Legal Aid

“Western Center’s dedication to working with local programs to address systemic issues will have a long-lasting impact on impoverished communities across the State of California, including Orange County. Their incredibly skilled staff has cultivated a community of fierce advocates who stand up for our most vulnerable. Thank you for giving us the tools to tackle impactful legal issues with our limited resources. It’s an honor to be on the same team.”
LILI GRAHAM  Director of Litigation at Community Legal Aid SoCal

“As our organization has started to develop more capacity to do affirmative tenants’ rights litigation, Western Center has been a great resource for consulting on overall strategy, sharing and reviewing pleadings, and providing guidance on procedural next steps. We feel more confident knowing they are there to support us!”
LAURA MATTER  Attorney at Greater Bakersfield Legal Assistance

“Western Center on Law and Poverty has been a truly invaluable resource to our advocacy. The depth and breadth of housing expertise Western Center brings to our litigation team has been integral to protecting our client’s rights and ensuring the most positive outcomes possible. We are grateful for the role Western Center plays in legal services and we look forward to continuing to work with them on many other cases in the future.”
NATALIE A. MINEV  Staff Attorney at Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles

“NLSLA regularly relies on Western Center attorneys to work with our advocates on cases that range from significant issues with broad impact to complex individual actions. Western Center lawyers are strategic thinkers with excellent legal and policy advocacy skills who provide a statewide perspective on many diverse issues and insight on individual cases. Western Center’s experienced advocates provide invaluable information, guidance, vision, and skill that enhance NLSLA’s ability to make a positive impact in the communities we serve.”
DAVID PALLACK  Director of Litigation at Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County
Western Center’s litigation and advocacy is amplified through critical pro bono partnerships with law firms and law schools, whose attorneys and students donate thousands of hours of time to support our work.
“Pillsbury had the valuable opportunity to participate with Western Center and a coalition of other non-profit legal groups to challenge the DMV’s practice of suspending the licenses of drivers who cannot afford to pay traffic fines and fees, or who are unable to appear in court to challenge those fines and fees. As a result of our lawsuit, the DMV ultimately released countless “legacy” suspensions that it claimed it was not required to release under the legislature’s amendments to the Vehicle Code to prohibit failure-to-pay suspensions. Our team consistently turned to Western Center for the benefit of their knowledge and experience – as a junior litigator, I particularly benefited from the opportunity to work closely with lawyers who have dedicated their entire career to defending the rights of underrepresented Californians. It was an honor to work with so many talented lawyers on a case that has a practical impact for so many people.”

SYDNEY WARD Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP

“Partnering with Western Center helps our firm’s attorneys fulfill their obligation to provide important pro bono services to those in need. Skadden joins forces with Western Center attorneys to tackle some of the most challenging and complex cases in California. One thing our firm trusts about Western Center is that it identifies the cases and challenges others don’t see that will make a difference. It’s natural to want to join such efforts.”

ALLEN L. LANSTRA Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP

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“Blue Shield of California Foundation partners with Western Center on Law & Poverty because both of our organizations fight for the well-being of all Californians, particularly our neighbors who struggle the most. Western Center is a leader in preserving and expanding access to health care for Californians regardless of immigration, age, or health status, and we rely on them to help us further our mission.”

RACHEL WICK  Senior Program Officer at Blue Shield of California Foundation

“There are few issues facing California that are more critical than housing and homelessness. The California Community Foundation is proud to support Western Center on Law & Poverty as they protect tenants from eviction and landlord abuse, ensure access to housing, preserve existing housing and promote equitable planning and development.”

ANN SEWILL  Vice President – Health and Housing at California Community Foundation

We could not do any of the work we do without the generosity of our donors. Thank you!
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REVENUE

GRANTS & CONTRACTS 2,196,473
CONTRIBUTIONS 1,102,096
ATTORNEYS’ FEES 1,210,350
CY PRES 725
INTEREST & INVESTMENTS (8,805)
OTHER 16,098
TOTAL REVENUE 4,516,937

EXPENSES

PROGRAM 3,266,451
GENERAL & ADMINISTRATIVE 367,476
FUNDRAISING 449,137
CARRY OVER 433,873
TOTAL EXPENSES 4,516,937
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GARDEN PARTY
OCTOBER 10, 2019
FEATURED ARTISTS FROM LAS FOTOS PROJECT

Las Fotos Project’s mission is to elevate the voices of teenage girls from under-resourced communities. Through the lens of photography, students capture moments that inspire them and others to critically examine the world around them. This exploration empowers students to become agents of change, channeling their creativity for the benefit of themselves, their community, and future careers.

To learn more about Las Fotos Project visit lasfotosproject.org.