I knew then and I know now that, when it comes to justice, there is no easy way to get it.

— CLAUDETTE COLVIN
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A LETTER FROM WESTERN CENTER’S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CRYSTAL D. CRAWFORD

Standing on the shoulders of previous Executive Directors, it is an honor to take the helm at Western Center in this season of renewed community commitment to fighting systemic racial and economic injustice. Over the past 54 years, Western Center’s mission has been transformative: advocating via the legislature and the courts on behalf of Californians experiencing poverty. However, 2020 was a year like no other. Our communities faced many challenges, including the ongoing disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and its effects on health, housing, education, and employment. Nevertheless, we persisted. As we embrace the promise of 2021, we must take time to reflect on what we achieved in 2020, despite the many challenges.

Only a few weeks after we first heard the term “COVID-19,” we closed our offices and joined the rest of the world in adjusting to drastically different ways of living. Our legislative agenda had to be re-focused to address immediate pandemic needs and our litigation was impacted by court closures. Still, Western Center worked diligently to preserve and strengthen economic security, health, housing and basic needs for Californians impacted by poverty. We did so by building on our 54-year legacy of lessons learned and victories won.

It can be hard to feel optimistic when faced with so many challenges. However, we remain hopeful. We have seen, and continue to see, the impact of our advocacy and the power of people to address systemic injustices and help each other through multiple crises. We call on all of our partners and stakeholders to join us in thinking deeply about how we can continue to build a better, stronger, more sustainable, and fulfilling tomorrow for all Californians. In the words of Langston Hughes’ poem Dream of Freedom:

A year from now, I’m hopeful that we will look back and say that 2021 was an improvement on 2020. Western Center will do its part by continuing to take diligent, measurable steps forward to advance human rights, economic dignity, and racial equity. We are counting on your continued partnership and support.

In solidarity,

CRYSTAL D. CRAWFORD, ESQ.

WE MUST DISSENT FROM THE FEAR, THE HATRED, AND THE MISTRUST...WE MUST DISSENT BECAUSE AMERICA CAN DO BETTER, BECAUSE AMERICA HAS NO CHOICE BUT TO DO BETTER.

— JUSTICE THURGOOD MARSHALL
For over five decades, Western Center on Law & Poverty has advocated on behalf of Californians experiencing poverty in every branch of government—from the courts to the legislature. Through the lens of economic and racial justice, we litigate, educate and advocate around health care, housing, public benefits, access to justice, and financial security laws, policies, and administration.

**ADMINISTRATIVE ADVOCACY**
Much like our litigation, our work with county, city, and state administrators ensures that the policies and procedures meant to protect and uplift Californians living in poverty are implemented properly across California. Sometimes a simple shift in procedure, or guidance from our advocates, can make a difference in real life outcomes for thousands of Californians.

**BUDGET ADVOCACY**
Budget victories are as essential as state laws or important litigation. While budget advocacy often proceeds quietly, its impact on individuals and families can be far reaching and life changing. Despite the pandemic, which plunged millions of Californians into precarious economic circumstances, the California budget ended up with an unexpected surplus due to big gains by California’s wealthy. We are pushing the state to use that money to bring California closer to true economic and racial equity, rather than allowing the gulf to widen between the haves and have-nots.

**IMPACT LITIGATION**
We file litigation across California to ensure the laws to protect and support Californians with low incomes—laws we often sponsor in Sacramento—are upheld by government and private entities. Good laws mean nothing without enforcement.

**POLICY ADVOCACY**
Our state policy work centers on advancing legislation that gets to the heart of the issues causing California’s massive income inequality, unsustainable housing market, lack of access to health care, and destructive systems of justice. In 2020, much of the work involved protecting renters from eviction and getting emergency food assistance to struggling Californians. Western Center started the year with 38 bills, but due to COVID-19, the legislature significantly narrowed the overall number of bills. Even so, our advocates worked tirelessly to make sure people with low incomes are protected in California law, both during the pandemic and after.
HISTORY WILL JUDGE SOCIETIES AND GOVERNMENTS — AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS — NOT BY HOW BIG THEY ARE OR HOW WELL THEY SERVE THE RICH AND THE POWERFUL, BUT BY HOW EFFECTIVELY THEY RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF THE POOR AND THE HELPLESS.

— CÉSAR CHÁVEZ
California has the 5th largest economy in the world, but it also has the highest rate of poverty in the United States – a gulf that was dramatically increased by COVID-19. Holding the line to prevent poverty was a top priority for Western Center last year.

**FINANCIAL SECURITY**

Through work with Western Center’s coalition partners, we achieved the following budget and administrative gains:

- **ENDING** exclusion of ITIN (Individual Taxpayer Identification Number) tax filers in California’s Earned Income Tax Credit program (CalEITC).
- **RESTORING** CalWORKs assistance to the full 60 months permitted under federal law, beginning in 2022.
- **INSTITUTING** Homestead Act protections against home loss during bankruptcy and establishing a new state entity charged with licensing debt collectors and protecting consumers from abusive and illegal debt collection practices.
- **EXPANDING** the amount of child support payments California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) families keep from $50 to $100 a month for one child, and up to $200 for two or more children.
FINANCIAL SECURITY

LEGISLATION

SB 144 (MITCHELL) / AB 1869 (BUDGET COMMITTEE)
This trailer bill repealed 23 criminal justice fees and expunged an estimated $16 billion in outstanding debt associated with those fees. We achieved this historic, first in the country victory in coordination with the Debt Free Justice Coalition.

SB 1290 (DURAZO & MITCHELL)
Requires counties to stop collecting juvenile fees assessed before 2018 (our co-sponsored bill SB 190 stopped new debt from accumulating after 2018, but did not eliminate existing debt). California is the first state in the country to eliminate juvenile fees.

SB 1065 (HERTZBERG)
Makes specified changes to the CalWORKs Homeless Assistance Program. This bill is a favorite of public benefit legal service programs.

SB 1409 (CABALLERO)
Requires the Franchise Tax Board to analyze and develop a plan to implement a “no return” tax filing pilot program to increase the number of claims of the CalEITC.

AB 2325 (CARRILLO)
This law was allowed to sunset in 2019, requiring child support order suspensions to be processed manually for people incarcerated for more than 90 days, rather than having them automatically suspended. AB 2325 restores Section 4007.5 of the Family Code with a 3-year sunset.

AB 3073 (WICKS)
Requires the Department of Social Services to issue guidance on allowable practices to maximize CalFresh eligibility for people leaving jail or prison.

LITIGATION

HERNANDEZ V. CA DMV
This case was filed in 2016 to challenge how traffic courts suspend a driver’s license when a driver doesn’t pay a ticket or appear in court. Failure to pay issues were resolved in 2018 through a combination of legislative change and litigation so drivers no longer have licenses suspended for unpaid traffic tickets in California. This summer we won a victory in the Court of Appeal on the remaining issue—what type of notice a traffic court must send the DMV to suspend a driver’s license for failing to appear in court. The court sided with us and found that traffic courts must send a notice alleging that the failure to appear was willful. We mediated a final resolution in the case, in which the DMV agreed to a stipulated judgment as to how the Court of Appeal decision will be implemented. Tens of thousands of drivers will have their licenses reinstated, and going forward, the DMV will not suspend licenses unless the traffic court says the failure to appear was willful. The next step is advocacy to make sure traffic courts don’t abuse the process when a driver fails to appear because of financial, work, family or other excusable reasons.

CO-COUNSEL: American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California; Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area; Bay Area Legal Aid; Pillsbury; Gould School of Law Clinic; East Bay Community Law Clinic

SAFUTO V. CITY OF LOS ANGELES
A final settlement was reached in our case challenging the City of Los Angeles’ towing practices. The central issue—which did not get resolved—was whether it violates the constitution for a city to tow a car without considering if the tow is necessary (i.e., a car blocking traffic). A fight for another day. In this case, the city agreed to several policy changes in its Community Assistance Parking Program (CAPP), which allows people who are unhoused to do community service to satisfy traffic tickets, and eliminated its rule that people only have 60 days to enroll in a payment plan for parking tickets. Parking tickets are important because the California Vehicle Code allows cities to tow cars that have five or more unpaid tickets and because one unpaid ticket can hold up vehicle registration, and unpaid registration is a reason for towing. The client in the case is also receiving $9,500 in compensation for his car that was towed and sold when he could not afford to get it out of impound.

CO-COUNSEL: Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles; American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of Southern California

ORTEGA V. JOHNSON
In a published opinion in November, the Court of Appeal held that recipients of CalFresh food assistance whose benefits are stolen electronically through no fault of their own are entitled to reimbursement. The court ordered the Department of Social Services to reimburse the two clients who brought the case and to change its policies to benefit recipients statewide.

CO-COUNSEL: American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California; Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area; Bay Area Legal Aid; Pillsbury; Gould School of Law Clinic; East Bay Community Law Clinic
If you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.

— TONI MORRISON
2020 was all about keeping people housed during the pandemic. In the midst of an existing housing and homelessness crisis, that was no small feat. The ramifications of decisions made in 2020 and 2021 will reverberate throughout the decade – influencing whether California can end its housing crisis or not. We believe the pandemic also brought opportunities, and we hope to build on some of what was accomplished in 2020.

**FAIR HOUSING**

Western Center’s housing advocates helped the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) implement new fair housing regulations, which Western Center did extensive work on, through a multi-part training series and creation of educational materials.

We also coordinated with DFEH on outreach and education on COVID-19 related fair housing issues for administrators and legal aid partners.

Western Center commented on and advocated for additional tenant protections in a new set of fair housing regulations, and we supported the state’s outreach efforts for new fair housing regulations.

**COVID-19 RESPONSE**

Western Center coordinated advocacy aimed at the state Judicial Council and Governor Newsom to enact an eviction moratorium, and participated in subsequent advocacy to extend the Judicial Council’s Emergency Rule 1 and defend it against litigation attacks by landlords.

We led advocacy campaigns to ensure the court eviction process incorporated all tenant protections.

Western Center housing attorneys trained court staff, organizers, tenants, legal services attorneys, health care workers, and others regarding the continuously changing eviction protections during COVID-19.

We coordinated with multiple state agencies on the implementation and interpretation of various tenant protection laws and ensured guidance and educational materials were accurate and accessible to our client communities.

Our housing attorneys led weekly calls attended by hundreds of advocates across the state to coordinate tenant protection response.

We also coordinated comments from housing advocates statewide to improve the California Department of Real Estate’s Landlord-Tenant Guide, which was published in Fall 2020.

**HOWEVER LONG THE NIGHT, THE DAWN WILL BREAK.**

— AFRICAN PROVERB
LEGISLATION

AB 3088 (CHIU)
Our biggest legislative priority for the year was to ensure that the session did not adjourn without protections in place for renters at risk of eviction due to the pandemic. Through a complicated negotiation process, a compromise came in the form of AB 3088 (Chiu et al.) to ensure that nonpayment of rent due to COVID-related hardship could not form a basis for eviction.

Western Center provided extensive comments to the Department of Housing and Community Development on its implementation of Assembly Bill 686 (Santiago, 2019), a Western Center-sponsored bill to embed the duty to affirmatively further fair housing in California law.

TABLED, BUT NOT LOST:
Several of our sponsored bills were put on hold. Both AB 2763 (Bloom), which would have ensured that all tenants displaced from a Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)-financed rehab project are provided relocation benefits, and AB 3352 (Friedman), which would have prevented code enforcement inspectors from refusing a request for inspection, were shelved in light of the COVID-shortened legislative calendar. We look forward to renewing our efforts on these and other legislative proposals in the 2021 session.

LITIGATION

APARTMENT ASSOCIATION OF GREATER LOS ANGELES V. CITY OF LOS ANGELES
In the immediate aftermath of the declaration of state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a patchwork of local, state, and federal eviction protections emerged to protect people from losing their homes. Landlord groups across the country filed legal challenges to these eviction protections, including a case filed in California courts against the state’s Judicial Council for an emergency rule preventing the courts from processing most evictions, and another challenging the City of Los Angeles' eviction protections in federal court. Western Center joined local partners and pro bono counsel in representing tenant advocacy groups’ intervention in these cases to defend COVID-related eviction protections from attack. In Apartment Association of Greater Los Angeles v. City of Los Angeles, the federal district court denied the Apartment Association's motion for preliminary injunction, finding that the city had a reasonable basis for enacting the challenged tenant protections.

CASE TO WATCH: ST. JAMES V. WIB HOLDINGS AND BILLS
A Santa Monica tenant residing in the same apartment for nearly 40 years filed suit to challenge her landlord’s refusal to accept her Housing Choice Voucher rent subsidy. Following Western Center’s successful effort to add Housing Choice Vouchers as a “source of income” in California’s fair housing protections (SB 329, 2019), Western Center is representing the tenant to ensure those protections are meaningfully enforced. Our co-counsel in this case is Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles.
The Health Consumer Alliance (HCA) and each of its health consumer center partners could not offer the breadth and depth of quality health consumer advocacy services without the expert support, resources, and guidance from the health staff at Western Center. Their rapid dissemination of detailed information and instruction for our attorneys and advocates during the onset of the public health emergency was crucial given the rapid deluge of federal and state policy changes issued. Western Center has always been a cornerstone of the work of HCA advocates throughout the state.

— JACK DAILEY  Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Director of Policy and Training; Coordinator of the Health Consumer Alliance

In a pandemic, nothing is more important than health. 2020 revealed all of the ways income and racial inequality impacts health. We are always working to close health gaps in California so everyone has access to the care they need; though 2020 was unprecedented, it was no exception.

**HEALTH**

**ADMINISTRATIVE ADVOCACY**

**MEDI-CAL INCOME ELIGIBILITY PARITY FOR ELDERS AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Elders and people with disabilities will no longer be subject to lower income eligibility than most other adults. The change took effect in December of 2020, despite multiple attempts by the state to delay.

**IMPROVED MEDI-CAL RENEWAL FORMS**

For the first time, elders and people with disabilities will easily be able to keep their health insurance active, and millions of other Californians will receive more readable and understandable paperwork for renewing Medi-Cal.

**HALTED MEDI-CAL COVERAGE CUTOFFS DURING THE PANDEMIC**

When COVID-19 hit and federal law prohibited the state from terminating Medi-Cal coverage, hundreds of thousands of Californians saw their coverage end anyway. We pressured the state to restore coverage for over 100,000 Californians, and to preserve Medi-Cal for millions more.

**MY PEOPLE SUFFER FROM A GLOBAL PANDEMIC FAR GREATER THAN CORONAVIRUS EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR. IT’S CALLED SYSTEMIC RACISM. IT LEADS TO HIGH STRESS, PREVENTABLE NUTRITIONAL DISEASES, HIGH ANXIETY, HIGH MORTALITY, POLICE VIOLENCE, SELF-HATE, INTRA-RACIAL VIOLENCE, MASS INCARCERATION, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, MISOGYNOIR, MISEDUCATION, DEATH BY SUICIDE. ALL OF THAT, AND MORE.**

— BYRON HURT  Filmmaker
LITIGATION

KELLEY V. KENT
Western Center, along with Bet Tzedek, Disability Rights California, Justice in Aging, and McDermott Will & Emery, won Kelley v. Kent, a lawsuit against the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) for its more than five-year delay of an important Affordable Care Act provision. As a result, thousands of Medi-Cal beneficiaries with severe disabilities will be able to get more affordable Medi-Cal care at home and avoid being put in a nursing home.

JANE H. V. KENT
Western Center, along with Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County and pro bono firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, settled this lawsuit with the Department of Health Care Services. The lawsuit sought to protect administrative fair hearing decisions that granted Medi-Cal beneficiaries with severe disabilities the option to remain with their doctors. As a result, this type of Medi-Cal administrative hearing decision will have more stringent due process rules to avoid improper reversals.

LEGISLATION

AB 2520 (CHIU)
Removes barriers to applying for public benefit programs by requiring providers to complete eligibility forms for public benefit programs and making it easier for patients to access their own medical records.

AB 2276 (REYES)
Implements the California Auditor’s recommendations to increase blood lead screenings of children on Medi-Cal, as already mandated, and would require the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to update risk factors for evaluating risk of lead poisoning.

Western Center has been instrumental in presenting and breaking down elements of newly enacted tenant protections. Its AB 3088 training was widely used by our agency to familiarize pro bono and our own housing advocates of the applicable tenant protections, specifically as we implemented an ongoing remote clinic to address the increasing demands for housing advocacy. To provide further context, our office was receiving roughly 75 calls per day with requests for housing advice and assistance.

Additionally, Western Center hosted and facilitated critical discussions with advocates across the state, as we discussed alarming trends and identified effective strategies to implement in our housing practice. Western Center also served as a voice for our agency in advocating to state legislators on issues that impact our housing work and most significantly, our vulnerable clients.

TRINIDAD OCAMPO
Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County, Supervising Attorney - Eviction Defense/ Housing Programs

Western Center attorneys and advocates provide help to hundreds of legal services and community-based attorneys and advocates throughout the state and nation. 2020 required us to do training and meetings virtually, which meant we were able to significantly expand our reach and impact. The webinar platform allows us to reach a wider audience, including advocates who do not have the time or resources to travel to in-person trainings. We also provided 30 percent more one-on-one technical assistance than in 2019, and published numerous advocate resources in all of our issue areas.

WESTERN CENTER’S SUMMER TRAINING SERIES
Every year Western Center hosts a summer training day designed to teach litigation fundamentals to new attorneys and summer law clerks. For past training days, we had 75 attendees at each Northern and Southern California location; in 2020 we had an average of 150 attendees per training. Topics included research, writs, declarations, depositions, and race-based claims.

COVID EVICTION DEFENSE CALLS
In response to the rapidly changing public health and economic crises and the need for individual and systemic advocacy, Western Center’s housing team convened a weekly, statewide call to provide updates and coordinate tenant protection response. Calls regularly had over 150 attendees.

WESTERN CENTER’S 2020 HEALTH SUMMIT: ADDRESSING RACISM AS A HEALTH CRISIS
Our 2020 Health Policy summit explored racism as a public health crisis, and potential policy solutions. Over 70 health advocates throughout the state convened to plan an anti-racist policy agenda and advance our shared mission.

WORKING GROUPS AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT
Western Center’s staff participates in dozens of stakeholder working groups and task forces, which allows us to keep an ear to the ground for emerging issues, address ongoing problems, create new solutions, and maintain and strengthen relationships with community-based organizations and other stakeholders.
STICKS & STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES BUT YOUR WORDS WILL NEVER HURT AS MUCH AS YOUR SILENCE.
Western Center’s work is amplified through pro bono partnerships with law firms and law schools, whose attorneys and students donate thousands of hours to support our work.

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I AM ONLY ONE, BUT STILL I AM ONE.
I CANNOT DO EVERYTHING, BUT
STILL I CAN DO SOMETHING. AND
BECAUSE I CANNOT DO EVERYTHING,
I WILL NOT REFUSE TO DO THE
SOMETHING THAT I CAN DO.

— EDWARD EVERETT HALE
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A NOTE FROM LOIS D. THOMPSON AND DAVID ELSON, WESTERN CENTER BOARD CO-CHAIRS AND CO-INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS FOR MUCH OF 2020

We could not be more proud of the way staff surpassed themselves in advancing the mission of Western Center while also working to better address systemic racism and to build understanding and racial justice within the organization. And, we had fun! We are thankful for the opportunity to be “up close and personal” to see the staff work so effectively, and to have helped pave the way for the arrival of Western Center’s exciting new Executive Director, Crystal D. Crawford.
When I joined Western Center and its housing team at the beginning of March 2020, I had no way of knowing that in two weeks, I’d be working from my kitchen table and occupied around the clock with my colleagues and partners trying to stop Californians with low incomes from being evicted during a global pandemic. 2020 was a wild ride, but I am so grateful to be working at an organization at the front lines of this advocacy, with colleagues and partners who are smart, compassionate, and dedicated to racial and economic justice.

— NISHA VYAS, WESTERN CENTER SENIOR ATTORNEY
FEATURED ARTIST
KELLY MALKA
Kelly Malka is an illustrator and designer working and living in her hometown of Los Angeles, California. Before moving back to L.A. in 2020, Kelly spent five years as a traditional Graphic Designer in San Francisco working in advertising. While working full-time as a designer, she always made time and space for her freelance illustration work. She started working with non-profits and cause-based organizations, and was able to feel and see how powerful a tool art can be in spreading awareness, information, and making an emotional and tangible impact. After a long year playing with the idea of moving back to her hometown of L.A. and pursuing illustration full-time, she finally summoned up the courage to quit her full-time gig, move and become a freelancer in January 2020. Since then, she’s been able to focus on her illustration work and take on more meaningful projects. Although it feels like a strange time for a major life/career change, it has also been such an important time to create art and to make change using it. Kelly has made work for Nike, The Los Angeles Times, Adobe, Rock the Vote, Reebok, and many more. See more of Kelly’s work at kellymalka.com.

FEATURED ARTIST
MIKI TURNER
Miki Turner is an award-winning photojournalist/producer/author who is currently a professor at the University of Southern California. A world traveler based in Los Angeles, Turner specializes in street, travel and portrait photography. Her work has appeared in The Oakland Tribune, Ft. Worth Star-Telegram, Orange County Register, Chicago Tribune, Ebony, Jet, ESPN, MSNBC.com, BET.com, AOL.com, Essence, Caribbean Travel & Life, TheRoot.com, and several other publications. Additionally, she’s curated exhibitions in Saudi Arabia, Florence, Italy, and Los Angeles. Her photo “Abaya Road,” was a prize winner at the 2015 Florence Biennale. Turner is the author of two photo books—journey to the woman I’ve come to love and tomorrow; and is currently working on vol. 2 of the journey series and an upcoming Paris exhibition. See more of Turner’s work at mikiphotogallery.com.