

FAMILY VIOLENCE APPELLATE PROJECT

# ANNUAL REPORT

# 2025



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Andrew Seko  
Development & Grants Coordinator

Arati Vasani  
Senior Managing Attorney

Cory Hernandez  
Senior Managing Attorney

Deborah Son  
Executive Director/CEO

Elissa Gray  
Staff Attorney

Jennafer Dorfman Wagner  
Director of Programs

Lupe Mendoza  
Intake Specialist

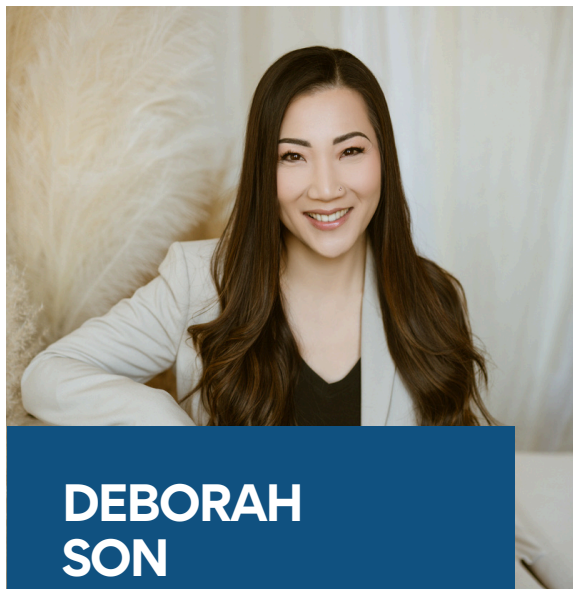
Renee Boman  
Senior Paralegal

Shuray Ghorishi  
Senior Managing Attorney

Tammi Relyea  
Operations Manager

Taylor Campion  
Senior Managing Attorney

# LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



**DEBORAH  
SON**

Executive Director/CEO

## Dear Friends of FVAP,

As a child, I witnessed domestic violence in my home. I did not yet have the words to name what I was experiencing, but that experience colored every stage of my growth and became the lens from which I felt the joys and pains of this world. Resources were sparse, and my sister and I were left to make sense of home conditions without guidance from people and communities that might have supported us. Those early experiences planted a seed that has grown into a determination that survivors must not stand alone.

Today, at Family Violence Appellate Project, we use that determination to transform the systems necessary to ensure justice and safety are attainable by all. FVAP exists because survival

should not be the final outcome of rejecting abuse. Lasting healing and empowerment is. By intervening at the highest courts, we protect families for generations by holding court systems accountable and shaping what law looks like when applied to human lives.

In 2025, FVAP continued to move forward with strength and clarity. Even as funding for social justice grew tighter and requests for our services surged, we kept fighting for survivors, expanding appellate representation, strengthening pro bono partnerships, deepening survivor-centered advocacy, and investing in training across the legal community. This work is often unseen, but its ripple effects are profound.

What makes me most proud is not only what we accomplished, but how. With integrity. With collaboration. With care. Over 500 attorneys and paralegals offered pro bono support in 2025, with 35 firms contributing more than 8,000 hours, enabling FVAP to operate like a large law firm on a fraction of the budget.

As someone who once stood on the other side of this work, I do not take this responsibility lightly. Leading FVAP is both an honor and a promise: that we will push systems to do better, elevate survivor voices, and meet challenges with courage.

The road ahead is filled with possibility. Together, we are building something enduring. A future where survivors are met not with barriers, but with pathways to justice, healing, and lasting protection. Thanks to your generous support, FVAP continues establishing the precedents and norms that protect survivors, in California and beyond.

Thank you for believing in this mission. Thank you for standing with FVAP as we continue transforming pain into power and hope into action.

With deep gratitude and determination,

A white handwritten signature on a dark blue background. The signature is stylized and appears to read 'Deborah Son'.



# FVAP: CORE BELIEFS

## MISSION

We believe no one should endure abuse. We ensure the safety and well-being of survivors of gender-based abuse, including domestic violence, and their children by helping them obtain effective appellate representation.

## VISION

We believe justice should be available to everyone, not just those who can afford it. Our free, high-quality legal representation gives survivors the best possible chance at success in their appeal. Ultimately our goal is to break the intergenerational cycle of trauma and abuse. By making sure all kids have the chance to grow up in safe, healthy homes, we are building a better future for the next generation.

Pictured: The team learns macrame at the 2026 staff retreat. From front to back: Tammi Relyea, Gizzel Yanez, Elissa Gray, Taylor Champion, Lupe Sanchez, Andrew Seko, Arati Vasan, Cory Hernandez

# XK'S STORY

X.K. came to the court seeking safety. What she found was a system that didn't fully see her. She experienced years of physical and sexual abuse, strangulation, threats, and the kind of coercive control that doesn't leave bruises: controlling where she worked, whether she could use the car, whether she'd have a path to legal status in the country she now called home.

When she asked the court for a restraining order, they said no. The judge characterized her experience as a custody dispute. The abuse that happened in China, the court suggested, might not count at all.

FVAP appealed — and won.

The appellate court found that the trial court had fundamentally misread her situation, dismissing documented abuse as a mere parenting disagreement. It ruled that all of the abuse X.K. described — including what happened in China — had to be considered. The case was sent back for a new hearing, with the full weight of her experience finally on the table.

X.K.'s case is not unusual. Across California, survivors are turned away by courts that misapply the law, minimize their experiences, or treat patterns of coercive control as something other than what they are. Every appeal FVAP files is a challenge to that misreading — a refusal to let a dangerous ruling be the last word. When we win, we don't just change the outcome for one person. We clarify the law for every survivor who comes afterwards.

**“Today’s judge granted the permanent renewal. It went pretty quick once he called us up, I felt a little in shock that he actually granted it. There’s relief that I won’t have an end date looming and have to think about going through another renewal process. It feels like I can reclaim my life.”**

*Anonymous Client*

# FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS

## Revenue

In-Kind Services	\$2,778,563
Government Grants	\$2,080,324
Contributions	\$267,154
Fundraising Events, net	\$97,139
Investment Gain, net	\$21,814
Other Income	\$12,156

**Revenue Total** **\$5,257,150**

## Expenses

Program Services	\$4,579,047
Administrative Services	\$298,211
Fundraising Expenses	\$257,149

**Expenses Total** **\$5,134,407**

FVAP operated with a net positive revenue margin of \$122,743 in 2025, and currently has a 7+ month reserve.

This is an excerpt from our audit report for the year ending December 31, 2025. The audit report was prepared on an accrual basis using Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) in the United States. The full audit report is posted [here](#) and also available upon request.

# PROGRAMS

Our programs bridge gaps and eliminate disparities in the court system, ensuring everyone has equitable access to justice and the safety they deserve.



## APPELLATE COURTS

Photo: Jennafer Dorfman  
Wagner, Shuray Ghorishi

- \* When courts get it wrong, **survivors pay the price**. FVAP provides free appellate representation to survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, elder abuse, stalking, and human trafficking.
- \* We use the law to challenge dangerous decisions and push for the outcomes survivors deserve.

Appeals Filed:

12

Win Rate

79%



## NEXT GENERATION

Photo: Arati Vasan

- \* Justice requires that the next generation of attorneys understands what survivors actually face in the courtroom.
- \* We train law students and early-career attorneys in appellate practice and trauma-informed advocacy - building a legal community better equipped to protect survivors for years to come.

Clerks:

4

Hours:

1,043



## EMERGENCY WRITS

Photo: Elissa Gray

\* FVAP's Lifeline to Justice Initiative was founded in 2023, lighting the pathway for survivors' access to emergency legal relief — a fast-moving lifeline when their safety can't afford delays.

\* **Some court orders are too dangerous to wait out.** FVAP has won 66% of the emergency writs we've filed since 2023, filings that practitioners across the field consider among the hardest to win.

Writs Filed

2

Win Rate:

66%



## HOUSING SAFETY & JUSTICE

Photo: Taylor Campion

\* FVAP provides trainings, case alerts, self-help tools, and free on-call technical assistance to attorneys and advocates working with survivors at the trial level.

\* **Leaving an abuser shouldn't mean losing your home.** We train advocates and attorneys serving survivors on housing protections that keep the crisis of abuse from becoming a housing crisis too.

Trainings:

9

Attendees:

380



## LEGAL SUPPORT

Photo: Renee Boman, Lupe Mendoza

- \* Changes in the law only protect survivors if the judges, attorneys, and advocates in the courtroom know it.
- \* FVAP provides trainings, case alerts, self-help tools, and free on-call technical assistance to attorneys and advocates working with survivors at the trial level.

Cases Screened:

**294**

Training and 1:1 TA Provided:

**1,357**



## POLICY ADVOCACY

Photo: Cory Hernandez

- \* Court decisions and case law shape the system — but so do the laws, rules, forms, and policies developed behind closed doors.
- \* FVAP brings the voices of survivors and indigent litigants to those conversations, ensuring the legal system is built with them in mind, not just around them.

Bills Supported:

**29**

Bills Sponsored:

**1**



# CRISIS: COURT REPORTER SHORTAGE

When a survivor leaves a dangerous relationship and goes to court, the stakes could not be higher. But across California, a systemic failure is quietly undermining their ability to fight back: verbatim records are not being created, and recordings are not available to survivors or their advocates.

\* Without a court reporter, there is no official record of what a judge said, what evidence was presented, or what went wrong. And without a record, there is often no appeal. The California Supreme Court put it plainly: the absence of a court reporter "will frequently be fatal" to a case. This isn't rare. Between October 2023 and March 2024, over 72% of California hearings had no court reporter present. Hiring one privately costs an average of \$3,300 per day — out of reach for nearly every survivor FVAP serves. The result: roughly 15% of the appeals FVAP turns away each year are viable — except for a missing record.

\* FVAP has fought this crisis on every front. We filed an amicus brief in *Jameson v. Desta*, which established that low-income litigants have the right to a free court reporter. We lobbied successfully for \$30 million in annual funding to recruit and retain reporters. And we sponsored SB 662 (Rubio), which would have authorized electronic recording when no reporter is available — a practical bridge solution. It was defeated in the legislature in 2023. The technology exists. The need is documented. What California lacks is enough reporters to fill the seats, and it's overdue that we find some alternatives.



# FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO A RECORD

On December 4, 2024, FVAP, represented by Covington & Burling LLP and Community Legal Aid SoCal, and Bay Area Legal Aid, representing itself, filed an original writ petition in the California Supreme Court to challenge the state’s ban on litigants using electronic recording in most civil court hearings, when a court reporter is unavailable. In 2025, the California Supreme Court accepted FVAP’s case addressing the ongoing court reporter shortage—a major step toward resolving this constitutional crisis.

On June 3, 2026, the Court heard oral arguments in the case from Sonya Winner (Covington & Burling), respondent Superior Courts, the California Attorney General, and amicus curiae Service Employees International Union California State Council (SEIU). The Justices’ thorough questioning was encouraging, demonstrating that they care about reaching the right decision here and recognize the harms of depriving low-income litigants of a verbatim record.

**“The California judicial system is in crisis, and our most vulnerable civil litigants are paying an intolerable price for it,”**

*Sonya Winner, Covington & Burling representing FVAP*

\* Visit [fvaplaw.org/court-reporter-shortage](https://fvaplaw.org/court-reporter-shortage) for more information about the case, from filings to amicus briefs to court orders and more.

**72%**

California court hearings without a court reporter



# COMMUNITY AWARDS



## SENATOR SUSAN RUBIO

Advocate of the Year

*Born in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Senator Susan Rubio is the proud daughter of a former Bracero farmworker. Senator Rubio represents more than one million residents in California's 22nd Senate District.*

## ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR: SENATOR SUSAN RUBIO

In addition to uplifting the needs of survivors in her work in the legislature, Senator Susan Rubio has ensured the voices of survivors are heard as a member of First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom's Domestic Violence Advisory Council, the Senate Gun Violence Working Group and the Working Group on Survivors of Sexual Assault. She has championed legislation to enable survivors to seek safety and justice from the courts, including adding coercive control and reproductive coercion to the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, working to ensure the juvenile dependency system doesn't punish domestic violence victims, enacting Piqui's Law, and fighting for funding and laws so survivors can have a record of what happens at court proceedings. Senator Rubio has exhibited extreme political bravery, championing the needs of survivors even when politically unpopular, such as authoring SB 662, a bill sponsored by FVAP that would have allowed courts to use existing electronic recording equipment to make a record of a hearing when no court reporter was available. In addition, the senator authored SB 882, the Keep Courts Safe from the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Act, which expands access to remote court appearances, and which FVAP is currently co-sponsoring.



## JENN PROTAS

Volunteer of the Year

*Jenn Protas, a shareholder at the law firm of Hoge Fenton, helps employers navigate California's numerous employment laws and defends them with an eye toward successful yet cost-effective resolution.*

## VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR: JENN PROTAS

Jenn Protas has been a steadfast volunteer with FVAP for over a decade — a tenure that spans nearly the entire life of our organization. From FVAP's earliest days, when we were still finding our footing, Jenn was there. That kind of longevity is rare and remarkable, and it speaks volumes about her character. She didn't show up once and move on; she stayed, grew with us, and continued showing up year after year with the same dedication and care she brought from the very beginning. As FVAP's outside employment counsel, Jenn's expert legal guidance has allowed us to operate with confidence, clarity, and integrity. Because of her service, we have been able to navigate complex organizational decisions, protect our staff, and build the kind of institutional strength that makes our mission sustainable. FVAP is a stronger, more agile organization because she chose to lend her expertise to our cause. Whatever the task, Jenn is deeply principled and genuinely mission-driven —protecting survivors requires not only great lawyering in the courtroom, but strong, values-aligned organizations doing the work.

# HORVITZ & LEVY <sup>LLP</sup>

ADVOCACY AT A HIGHER LEVEL



*Horvitz & Levy is the largest U.S. law firm specializing in civil appellate litigation and is best known for its unparalleled expertise and success in handling complex matters. The firm's collaborative approach is a key factor in its success, allowing attorneys to draw on the collective expertise of the entire firm to create tailored teams for each client's specific legal challenges.*

## PRO BONO AWARD: HORVITZ & LEVY

Since 2018, Horvitz & Levy has been our fierce and fearless partner in standing up for the rights of survivors. Across nearly 3,000 hours of pro bono time and counting, Horvitz has co-counseled with FVAP on numerous appellate cases, assessed cases for appeal, helped us prepare for oral argument in cases, and been a resource for us as the issues survivors face on appeal increase in complexity. As pro bono co-counsel, Horvitz & Levy has helped secure appellate relief not only for many survivor clients year after year but created published case law\* that has been cited repeatedly to help countless survivors at trial and on appeal. In their appellate work on behalf of our clients, Horvitz & Levy pursues innovative approaches that draw effectively upon the full array of legal options to provide relief for survivors throughout the appellate process.

*Pictured: Melissa Whalen,  
Jeremy Rosen, Rebecca Powell*

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\*S.Y. v. Superior Court (2018); Ashby v. Ashby (2021); G.G. v. G.S. (2024); and Navarro v. Cervera (2025).



# BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Nora Puckett, *OpenAI*

Pictured: Samantha S. Low, Ming Chen, Mariya Pamnani, Nora Puckett, Deborah Son, Scott Johnston, Keisha Wright, Jose Ramos, Jr., Michelle Osborne

## DIRECTORS

Bre Alvarado Jones, *Covington & Burling LLP*

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Erin Smith, *FVAP Co-Founder, Author*



## BRE ALVARADO JONES

Covington & Burling LLP

Bre Jones represents a wide range of companies in holding insurers accountable for paying claims. Her work on high-stakes federal and state court litigation, arbitration, and mediation and has repeatedly yielded positive results for clients in a wide variety of industries.



## SAMIA NOOR

UC Berkeley (Law Student)

Samia Noor is a native Southern Californian, first-generation student, and daughter of immigrants, currently pursuing her J.D. at Berkeley Law (Class of 2028). She plans to pursue a legal career dedicated to protecting women and families from abuse and expanding access to justice.



## LUCY RIDGWAY

Lucy Ridgway LCSW


Lucy Ridgway is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Oakland, specializing in family therapy and supporting families navigating family court proceedings. She is committed to the mission of FVAP and looks forward to contributing to its work protecting survivors and their families through the appellate process.



## DAMALI TAYLOR

O'Melveny & Myers LLP

Damali Taylor is a Partner at O'Melveny & Myers, LLP, where she advises clients on a range of civil litigation, as well as white collar matters, including criminal, internal, and regulatory investigations. Damali spent much of her career in public service advocating for survivors of violence and is thrilled to join the FVAP Board to help advance its commitment to that important work.



**“I would love to donate more to FVAP [...] I am a sole practitioner, working from home. I use the FVAP website all the time as a resource and refer other attorneys to it all the time. I know the wonderful work that you do.”**

*Jan Maiden, Family Law Attorney*

## SUSTAINERS CIRCLE

Donors who gave regularly throughout 2025

Alejandra Quintana   Jose A. Ramos, Jr  
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Deborah Appel   Nell Green Nysten  
Emily Stout-Garcia   Samantha Low

# MAJOR DONORS

Family Violence Appellate Project relies on the generous financial support of committed supporters like you. Without your donations, grants, and funding, survivors would be left without the representation they need and the fierce advocates they deserve.

## PLATINUM CIRCLE

\$100,000+

State Bar of California

## GOLD CIRCLE

\$50,000 - \$99,999

Anonymous   The Bellwether Foundation II



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**8,175**

2025 Pro Bono Hours



**\$2.8M**

In-Kind Donations

# IN-KIND DONORS

FVAP's staff is dedicated, passionate, and skilled, but we do not do this work alone. Thanks to the support of law firms and attorneys throughout the state, our yearly impact is more than doubled through pro bono and volunteer representation.

## DIAMOND CIRCLE

1,000+ hours

Covington & Burling LLP Gibson, Dunn  
& Crutcher LLP

## RUBY CIRCLE

500 - 999 hours

Debevoise & Plimpton LLP O'Melveny & Myers LLP

## SAPPHIRE CIRCLE

100 - 499 hours

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# FAMILY VIOLENCE APPELLATE PROJECT



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**justice happens the first  
time.**