

# **ACCESS JUSTICE BROOKLYN**

---

**2023 – 2024**

**Report**

# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

A pioneer of contemporary pro bono models and a progressive force in the community, Access Justice Brooklyn (AJB) has been serving our Brooklyn neighbors for more than 33 years – saving homes, securing families, and building the support and foundation for healthier, more stable lives. Through the expertise of our staff and trained pro bono volunteers, we provide free, accessible legal services to help close the gap in legal resources, representation, and outcomes that exists for low-income Brooklyn residents, furthering our vision of a more equitable borough.

With support from IOLA, during this period we delivered advice, brief services, and full and limited scope representation in 5,205 closed cases, benefiting 12,177 individuals and families. We also provided prevention-oriented community legal education and resources to 786 individuals through 24 legal education sessions, tabling events, and other outreach events, giving Brooklyn residents essential, practical information about their legal rights and options. In addition, through workshops and court-based clinics, we provided pro se assistance to 337 individuals, equipping them with completed legal documents and critical advice necessary to represent themselves more effectively in court. For non-Brooklyn residents and individuals with matters outside of our scope of services, we provided 1,291 referrals to other legal and social service providers, helping ensure that individuals can obtain appropriate assistance for their legal concern. Further, over the last year we have made concerted efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of our legal resources, both by creating a “resource hub” on our website and by translating these resources into multiple languages frequently spoken by limited English proficient clients. During the period over 900 individuals accessed these legal resources through our website, which answer common



**Service Area:** Kings County

**Population Served:** General Low-Income Population

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**

Total Staff: 15	Lawyers: 9
Paralegals: 3	Others: 3

questions about topics such as deed scams, the path of foreclosure cases, wills and living wills, uncontested divorce, and consumer bankruptcy.

Our advocacy also helped Brooklyn residents secure \$3,068,548 in financial benefits and savings, improving the economic security of our clients and their households. AJB clients obtained \$67,397 in child and spousal support as well as \$5,089 in monthly child and spousal support payments, or \$61,068 in annualized benefits; recovered \$36,832 in debt collection matters; and obtained \$80,343 in foreclosure settlements, including emergency funds that help homeowners pay mortgage arrears and remain in their homes. We also helped clients save or recover \$417,563 through federal bankruptcy protection; reduce monthly child support payments by \$1,000; and reduce or dismiss \$235,252 in debt that would otherwise be levied from clients' wages; \$2,112,632 in other forms of debt collection; and \$101,175 in fines imposed by the NYC Department of Buildings, achieved through representation before the Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings (OATH). To alleviate the cost burden of court expenses on our clients, we also helped clients save \$11,265 in filing fees in uncontested divorce and bankruptcy cases.

Central to our model and mission, during the period we engaged 253 pro bono attorneys, law students, and other volunteers who donated 5,606 hours of compassionate, high-quality services to AJB clients. We also worked to recruit new volunteers by conducting Continuing Legal Education (CLE) training programs, which prepare private practice attorneys and other legal professionals to provide high-quality community legal support in our practice areas. We held or participated in 16 CLE trainings for 646 attendees during the period, as well as one non-CLE training for 45 attendees – increasing the number of pro bono volunteers equipped to assist our clients.

Access Justice Brooklyn serves Brooklyn residents who are considered low-income, defined as living at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, as well as clients who may have limited income but whose legal issues concern assets, such as foreclosure and property-related matters or estate planning. During this period, over 95 percent of our clients were Brooklyn residents. We assist non-Brooklyn residents where they have cases venued in Kings County, typically in consumer or family law matters; of the other five (5) percent of clients assisted during the period, three (3) percent lived in other New York City boroughs and two (2) percent lived in other New York counties or out of state.

## DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

Our primary intake channels vary by practice area: for our family law, elder law, and homeowner assistance programs we conduct most intakes via telephone, whereas for our consumer law practice we complete most intakes in person at our court-based clinics. We operate two consumer debt advocacy clinics in Kings County Civil Court: the Civil Legal Advice and Resource Office (CLARO) project and the Volunteer Lawyer for a Day (VLFD) Access to Justice program, where we provide day-of representation in consumer matters. We also conduct new client intakes through the Foreclosure Legal Assistance Group (FLAG) clinic at Kings County Supreme Court, the Kings County Supreme Court Foreclosure Clinic, and the OATH Homeowner Representation Project. We also conduct intakes and offer day-of representation to homeowners through the Friend of the Court program in Kings County Supreme Court.



In early 2023 we began using an AI-equipped telecommunication system, DialPad, which allows us to communicate with clients via text message, securely send and receive documents, and obtain transcriptions of voicemail messages. We have also used DialPad to offer pre-set options for callers who do not qualify for our services – seamlessly providing callers with contact details for bar associations and other providers who handle their type of legal issue, and improving the efficiency of our intake process.

We offer individual legal assistance remotely via telephone and videoconferencing platforms, and frequently participate in settlement conferences or hearings virtually where this practice has continued since the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, while most court and administrative hearings are now held in person, OATH continues to hold hearings telephonically, some bankruptcy hearings are held via Zoom, and Family Court continues to be hybrid. We conduct

telephonic intakes four days per week. Potential clients who contact us outside of intake hours can leave a voicemail or complete an online intake form through our cloud-based case management system, LegalServer, a link to which is available on our website Get Help page; our staff respond to these requests within a week of receipt. To meet clients' language needs, we use a telephonic interpretation service which provides interpretation in over 200 languages, and on an as-needed basis we engage a video interpretation service to assist clients who are American Sign Language (ASL) users.

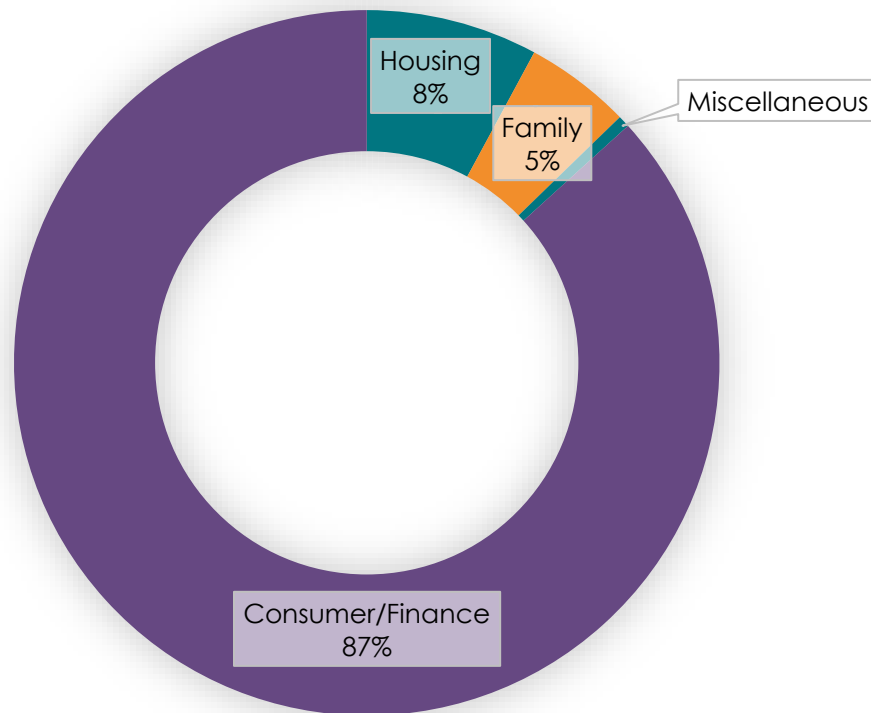
## CASE EXAMPLES

The following are representative examples of how our advocacy benefits low-income Brooklyn residents, and highlights the impact of legal support in addressing civil legal problems.

**Housing:** Victoria is a 91-year-old homeowner who has lived in the New Lots neighborhood of Brooklyn for over 35 years. She came to Access Justice Brooklyn for assistance with a pending foreclosure case in July 2023. While she had previously taken out a reverse mortgage in 2021 to pay household expenses and make home repairs, Victoria was unclear about the basis for the foreclosure case brought against her. AJB attorneys discovered that the bank had commenced a foreclosure action because Victoria had not returned the yearly certificate of occupancy form required for reverse mortgage holders. As she had auditory difficulties and was unable to send documents electronically, we met Victoria at her home to help her complete a verified answer and certificate of occupancy form, advise her about her case, and collect all other relevant case documents, including monthly mortgage statements and servicer letters.

After meeting Victoria, AJB filed her answer and contacted the bank's attorney to submit the certificate of occupancy. However, we then learned that Victoria was also behind on paying her taxes and insurance; though she had set aside funds to pay these bills, the bank would not apply the funds due to the default based on the certificate of occupancy. We negotiated with the bank to apply Victoria's set-aside funds to the outstanding taxes and insurance, after which the Plaintiff filed a motion to withdraw the foreclosure action, which was granted in February 2024. Once we assisted Victoria with her foreclosure case, we reached out to local housing counselors to provide support to Victoria on an ongoing basis. We also met Victoria at her home on multiple subsequent occasions to explain the requirements of the reverse mortgage so she could avoid default in the future and continue to age in place in her long-standing home.

# CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



**Consumer Law:** In April 2023, Access Justice Brooklyn met a Brooklyn Heights resident, Ellen, who sought assistance at the Civil Legal Advice and Resource Office (CLARO) clinic in Kings County Civil Court. Ellen had fallen on financial hard times during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was facing a consumer credit lawsuit for an allegedly unpaid credit card bill. Her income had remained extremely limited in 2023, rendering her unable to settle the case while her only source of income was public assistance. Further, despite the amount in controversy being under the prior Civil Court maximum of \$25,000, the plaintiff had opted to sue Ellen in Supreme Court, making obtaining legal assistance much more difficult. We nonetheless agreed to assist Ellen in opposing the motion for summary judgment, which had already been adjourned several times and was marked for a final date. With our assistance in drafting and filing written opposition, as well as preparing for oral argument with the judge, Ellen was able to defeat the bank's quest for judgment against her.

## OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

As the pandemic adversely impacted our ability to reach community members, we worked diligently over the last year to build new relationships with elected officials, schools, senior centers, and other organizations to increase our community presence. During this period, we attended more in-person events, including tabling events, fairs, and workshops, than we have for the last three years – allowing us to not only form new partnerships, but also reach a greater number of community members with our legal education and resources. During the period, 304 individuals attended our in-person community legal education presentations; 102 attended live webinars or viewed pre-recorded education sessions; and 380 individuals obtained information about our services and legal resources at tabling events and fairs. Additionally, we have promoted our programs and community events via social media campaigns and through targeted emails to our client distribution lists. In one such campaign last year, we posted information about a specific practice area each week and shared legal resources as individual posts on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, helping this essential information reach new audiences and improving visibility of these resources on our website. Where we host or participate in community events with partners, we also promote events across our social media channels as well as those of our partners so non-client community members can learn about our services.

**337**

people  
benefited  
from

**Pro Se  
Assistance**

**786**

people  
benefited  
from

**Community  
Legal  
Education**

**903**

people  
benefited  
from

**Web-Based  
Assistance**

**Community Legal Education:** Legal education and outreach is a core component of Access Justice Brooklyn's work and an essential complement to our legal services. We design and conduct prevention-oriented legal education throughout Brooklyn in coordination with senior centers, elected officials, community organizations, and other legal providers, with the goal of ensuring community members know their rights and improving the likelihood of early intervention – and positive outcomes – in their cases. In addition to our increased outreach through community fairs and tabling events, as described above, during this period we also strengthened our legal education program for older adults, the National Grid Foundation Senior Legal Education and Assistance Program (NGF Senior LEAP), by increasing the frequency of our senior-focused outreach events and revising our legal education materials to include more detailed information about wills, probate, and powers of attorney. Collectively, these efforts allowed us to reach a greater number of individuals this IOLA period compared to the prior year, benefiting 786 people through legal education sessions, workshops, and tabling events.

**Pro Se Assistance:** For individuals without representation, we provide pro se assistance to help them prepare essential legal documents and understand their rights and options. We primarily provide pro se assistance to clients in immigration matters through our partnership with Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobsen LLP, whose attorney volunteers staff immigration legal clinics coordinated by CUNY and NALEO throughout the year. In addition, for most of the IOLA period, our Homeowner Assistance Program team had a legal extern from New York Law School who helped staff the FLAG clinic in Kings County Supreme Court. The extern provided pro se assistance to 36 clients, helping unrepresented homeowners understand the foreclosure process and better navigate their options in court.

**Homeowner Workshops:** Last summer, we began holding legal workshops for homeowners in partnership with NYC Council Member Mercedes Narcisse, who represents Canarsie, Flatlands, Bergen Beach, and Mill Basin – neighborhoods where many of our homeowner clients live – with the goal of making homeowner education and pro se assistance more accessible for individuals who may not be able to travel to our court-based clinics or attend appointments during regular business hours. At each of these events, we provide a short presentation on the foreclosure process in New York State, property-related scams, Department of Buildings violations, and other common homeowner concerns, followed by individual consultations with attendees. During this IOLA period we held three workshops, the first of which was on June 7, 2023 for 17 attendees; the second on August 17, 2023 for 22 attendees; and the third on December 13, 2023 for 20 attendees. We have continued this partnership this spring, with one workshop conducted in April 2024 and plans for an upcoming presentation focused on deed theft later this month. We are exploring similar workshops in partnership with Brooklyn



Borough Hall as well as with several other elected officials in the City Council and New York State Assembly, with the intention of scheduling events for this summer and fall.

**National Grid Foundation Senior Legal Education and Assistance Program (NGF Senior LEAP):** Targeted outreach to older adults has been a central part of AJB's programming for over two decades; as part of our Senior LEAP, created with the support of the National Grid Foundation, we provide vulnerable Brooklyn seniors with legal education that helps them plan for their future care, avoid predatory scams, and age in place. During the period we held 13 presentations for 245 seniors, held in coordination with RiseBoro senior clubs in Stuyvesant Heights and Bushwick; Millennium Development centers in Midwood and Mill Basin; Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens' center in Brownsville; Jewish Association Serving the Aging (JASA), located in Coney Island, Fort Greene Council's center in Prospect Lefferts Garden, and AMICO Older Adult Center in Bay Ridge. These partnerships allow us to reach seniors where they already receive other services and in their own communities, making legal education and support accessible for older residents who often have mobility issues or limited digital literacy that can impede their ability to obtain legal help.

## TECHNOLOGY

Over the last year our director of legal services and pro bono coordinator created an online intake form for our weekly CLARO clinic that mimics the intake form in AJB's case management system, but can be completed by clients, volunteers, or other court personnel without requiring access to our case management system. This intake form is already saving significant administrative time typically involved in completing and transcribing paper intakes for as many as 70 clients seen on a given clinic day. We also purchased tablets, as reported below, which we have been using to conduct intakes at CLARO using the new intake form, and which we also plan to use at outreach events to easily track attendees and look up relevant client and case information during individual consultations.

We use a translation and interpretation service, LanguageLine, to make our services linguistically accessible to our clients and community members. Over the last year we have created a designated "resource hub" on our website which centralizes our legal resources so clients can easily obtain information about their legal concerns, and used LanguageLine to translate our legal resources on deed fraud, foreclosure scams, uncontested divorce, wills, and bankruptcy into Spanish, Russian, Simplified Chinese, and Haitian Creole – languages frequently spoken by our limited English proficient clients – to further improve the accessibility of our services. In addition to technology-related improvements impacting our programs, we invested in

improvements to our fundraising infrastructure by purchasing a subscription for iWave, made possible with support from the IOLA Technology Infrastructure Grant. iWave is a comprehensive prospect research and wealth screening tool that will significantly enhance our development team's ability to create targeted fundraising campaigns and identify new avenues for individual, corporate, and foundation support, giving our organization new and increased sources of revenue.

## IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

With IOLA support for technology improvements, Access Justice Brooklyn was able to make several investments which supported our programming and strengthened our fundraising capacity. We allocated \$3,074 to equipment purchase costs, including a laptop for a new staff attorney position focused on elder law, partially supported by IOLA funding; a share of the cost of five (5) Microsoft Surface Pro tablets and keyboards; and an iPad. Our staff and volunteers are now using the tablets to conduct paperless intakes at our court-based clinics – saving significant administrative time and simplifying our intake process. The associated labor costs for device set-up and maintenance are part of our contract with our IT vendor, RoundTable, a share of which is covered by our prime IOLA contract.

The remaining \$6,926 was allocated to a range of consultant and software and license-related investments made possible with this IOLA support. As mentioned above, we were able to invest in a long-awaited infrastructure improvement with a subscription to iWave, a comprehensive wealth screening tool that will significantly enhance our development team's capacity to identify potential donors and create targeted fundraising campaigns, increasing our individual, corporate, and foundation revenue. We also purchased Adobe Acrobat licenses for all our staff, streamlining management of intakes, client paperwork, and scanned court documents. Funding also supported a subscription to Benevity, a platform that processes individual donations and corporate matches, and additional website design support provided by Great Believer, the design agency we engaged for our 2022 rebrand and website refresh.

## PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

Access Justice Brooklyn's service model is essential to achieving our vision of a more equitable Brooklyn: leveraging the support and resources of pro bono attorneys and cross industry professionals maximizes the expertise of our small, dedicated staff and allows us to serve an exponentially greater number of people than we could alone. As part of our volunteer recruitment and training program, we conducted or participated in 17 training sessions for legal professionals during the period, attended by 691 attorneys, law students, and other advocates. Seven (7) of these CLE trainings were conducted as part of uncontested divorce clinics held with law firm and corporate partners, including Apple Bank and Perkins Coie; Goodwin Procter LLP; Bloomberg LP; AXA XL; Winston & Strawn LLP; Paul Hastings LLP; DLA Piper; and Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP, helping sustain our pro se uncontested divorce project and ensure clients on our waitlist can receive services in a timely manner. We forged new partnerships with DLA Piper and Goodwin Procter in the last year, placing a total of 17 Article 17A guardianship cases with these firms, and have strengthened our relationship with the law firm Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP to place bankruptcy cases for representation. Our other CLE trainings were stand-alone presentations, eight (8) of which focused on other legal topics including child support, custody, and visitation; the foreclosure process; will preparation; and consumer debt advocacy, and two (2) of which focused on ethical issues in pro bono representation and implicit bias, ensuring private practice attorneys have the skills necessary to provide community legal support.

**203**attorneys volunteered **1,460** hours**42**law students volunteered **4,141** hours**8**other volunteers volunteered **5** hours

During the period we offered trainings and clinics both virtually and in person, maximizing attendees' ability to complete requisite training in order to take cases for extended advocacy or representation. For those unable to attend on presentation dates, we record CLE programs and make them available to prospective pro bono volunteers upon request. To supplement our training programs, we also offer written materials with relevant case law, statutes, and forms, and match volunteers with experienced practitioners and mentors to ensure they have sufficient support and guidance to serve our clients.

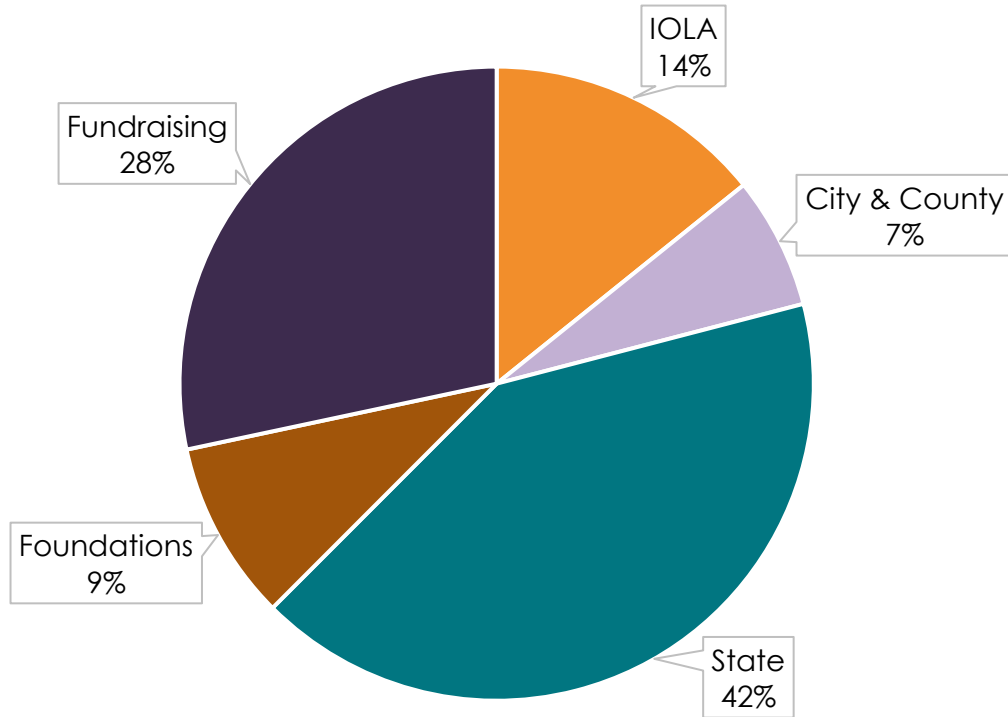
## SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

All of Access Justice Brooklyn's programs are made possible via collaboration with the city, state, and federal court systems as well as law schools and other legal service providers. For example, our CLARO clinic is a collaboration between Access Justice Brooklyn, Brooklyn Law School, and the Feerick Center for Social Justice at Fordham University School of Law, and our OATH Homeowner Representation Project is a partnership between AJB, OATH, and Brooklyn Law School and New York Law School, whose students provide essential support to these programs. Our law firm relationships are also essential to providing AJB clients with representation in bankruptcy, Article 17A guardianship, and custody and support cases, as well as sustaining our pro se uncontested divorce project. In all of these areas, we train and subsequently assign cases to pro bono volunteers for full and limited scope representation, allowing us to represent far more clients than we could through our staff alone.

Our memberships in various practice-specific coalitions are also essential to our programs, connecting us to other providers to staff court programs, make and receive client referrals, coordinate outreach, and collaborate on advocacy campaigns in support of legislation that improves the fairness and accessibility of the legal system for all court users. Our Homeowner Assistance Program staff are members of the Brooklyn Foreclosure Advocates, New York Citywide Foreclosure Task Force, HOPP Advocates, and OATH Working Group, and frequently collaborate with NHS Brooklyn, Brooklyn Legal Services, Brooklyn Legal Services Corp A, New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), and Grow Brooklyn to staff foreclosure clinics in Kings County Supreme Court and to refer clients for housing counseling as needed. For our CLARO and VLFD programs in Kings County Civil Court, as well as general consumer debt advocacy, we partner with the civil court system, Mobilization for Justice, and the New Economy Project, and are members of the New York Consumer Law Advocates group. AJB's organizational leadership participate in several city- and state-wide coalitions. As an organization, AJB is also a member of the New York Legal Services Coalition, enabling us to remain up to date about emergent legal issues and participate in advocacy campaigns with other providers.

# CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

**\$2,057,017.88**



<b>IOLA Funding</b>	<b>\$292,500.00</b>
<b>City &amp; County Funding</b>	<b>\$138,437.50</b>
<b>State Funding</b>	<b>\$854,583.44</b>
<b>Federal Funding</b>	<b>\$0.00</b>
<b>Foundations</b>	<b>\$188,625.00</b>
<b>Fundraising</b>	<b>\$ 582,871.94</b>
<b>Other Funding</b>	<b>\$0.00</b>