

THE BRONX DEFENDERS

2023 – 2024

Report

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

During this reporting period, The Bronx Defenders' Civil Action Practice continued to provide comprehensive civil legal services and community education to marginalized, low-income individuals and families in Bronx County. This resulted in civil legal and other services benefiting at least 8658 people via 5139 closed cases.

Highlights of these cases include:

- **1316 families** encompassing more than **3336 family members** received services to access or keep emergency, ongoing, or one-time public or other benefits and judgements, including **nutritional assistance, cash assistance, emergency rental assistance, supplement security income (SSI), unemployment & affirmative employment and other judgments** representing \$419,467 monthly ongoing benefits, \$5,033,604 in annualized ongoing benefits, and \$993,573 in retroactive benefits;
- **313 individuals and family members**, remained in their homes, avoided eviction, or received services regarding their housing problems and representing a cost savings of at least \$31.5 million to taxpayers for eviction prevention and diversion from the Shelter system (estimating \$100,499.00 in taxpayer costs per family).
- **738 non-citizen clients**, benefiting **831 family members** received representation and services regarding their **immigration** needs.
- **429 clients** maintained their jobs and licenses or received advice or services regarding their employment matter;
- **1460 clients** received services for their consumer, seized property, reentry and other individual rights' needs.



Service Area: The Bronx

Population Served: General Low-Income Population

Staffing Full-Time Equivalents:

Total Staff: 149.9 Lawyers: 95.61

Paralegals: 19.97 Others: 34.32

Additional highlights:**Capacity Building to Deepen Impact of the Civil Action Practice (CAP):**

We continued to create important roles and tools to **enhance** our capacity and services for clients and support for our staff in CAP.

Enhancing CAP's Training Curriculum

Training Director for legal workers/advocates who are not lawyers: As CAP has grown, we have a larger crop of legal and benefits advocates as well as social workers who are part of our civil public defender movement. While we currently have an attorney who is a Training Director, based on feedback from the practice, we invested in a second Training Director, a legal worker who is not an attorney, to focus on onboarding and training of our advocate staff who are not attorneys, and have distinct training and onboarding needs, as they represent clients independently. This role also focuses on training for our interns and pro bono scholars.

Creation of Enhanced Guides for CAP staff: to support our hybrid work and virtual learning spaces, we focused on developing accessible tools, guides, guidance.

Increased trainings, learning spaces and access to supervisors and leaders in practice: We created over 60 in house trainings in addition to our robust new staff onboarding and training curriculum; we created roundtable virtual spaces for our housing, benefits, civil holistic and employment work and increased one-on-one access via weekly, biweekly and monthly office hours to get support from the Directors and other experts in the areas of social work, legal, training, data and housing.

The Bronx Defenders continues to prioritize our staff's wellness due to our critical client work, therefore, we have continued to have wellness trainings and spaces for our staff.

As our Right to Counsel Housing Team continues to grow, we have developed more robust trainings and roundtables to help our staff continue to stay updated on the law and constant changes in housing court and how to address the growing housing crises in NYC.

Increased Benefits Footprint

Given the dire benefits needs of the community we serve, this year we increased our benefits access to the Bronx community and grew our team to support our community work, our holistic services to clients in our immigration, criminal and family practice and to train and support our staff to do better, smarter benefits advocacy given the hardships under this administration.

The Bronx Defenders' benefits advocates have achieved significant savings for New York taxpayers through their dedicated efforts. By assisting clients in obtaining benefits from federal programs such as SNAP and TANF, state programs like ERAP, and from the NYC Human Resource Administration, our team has been able to secure \$993,573 in one-time benefits and over \$5,033,604 in annualized ongoing benefits for our clients.

Moreover, our proactive approach to early intervention has helped clients and their families avoid crises that would otherwise require local and state taxpayer funding to resolve. This preventative strategy has been remarkably effective, as evidenced by our ability to save over \$31.5 million in shelter spending by assisting 1150 families in avoiding eviction and providing other vital housing advocacy & services.

In addition to these achievements, our benefit advocates have expanded their services by now submitting housing-based subsidy applications in-house. This new approach allows us to conduct eligibility screenings for various housing subsidies, including Family Homelessness & Eviction Prevention Supplement, HIV/AIDS Services Administration, Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption, and Disability Rent Increase Exemption. By helping clients access these subsidies, we are able to prevent them from entering the shelter system, thereby reducing the financial burden on taxpayers.

Furthermore, our team assists clients with screening household compositions, particularly in cases involving Administration of Children's Services involvement where a child has been removed from the household. Through careful screening and advocacy, we can often add children back into the client's public assistance case, leading to an increase in entitlements and access to housing subsidies.

In addition to these achievements, our benefit advocates have started to expand their services by now assisting community members and clients in obtaining access to internet and phone services through the Lifeline program. This federal program allows clients and community members to have low-cost or free access to a phone and internet. Typically, entitlement programs at the federal and statewide levels require telephonic or virtual interviews, so our benefits advocates are now also including this program in our intake process.

Overall, our benefit advocates' diligent efforts have not only helped clients access crucial benefits but have also resulted in significant cost savings for New York taxpayers.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

Tens of thousands of clients come to The Bronx Defenders as institutional providers primarily through the criminal, family, immigration, or housing courts and to the Civil Action Practice through internal referrals. Additionally, as a trusted community resource, we also take cases on behalf of former clients, their friends and families, and increasingly from community members who turn to us knowing we offer compassionate and comprehensive legal representation. While this used to be on a walk-in basis, this has transitioned to a hybrid approach: community members can walk-in to connect or contact us through our various hotlines.

Beyond clients who are already connecting with The Bronx Defenders, we make an active effort to reach out to the broader Bronx community and make sure that people are aware of the legal and other resources and rights available to them. In the last year, we expanded our community organizing team to include community engagement, with a focus on understanding better the community we serve, connecting with community leaders, local elected officials and community organizations. Through these

collaborations and partnerships, we reach more Bronx residents who can benefit from advocacy, support and training around civil legal issues. As our community engagement work grows and our relationships with local community organizers and leaders deepen, we are connecting with greater numbers of community members who turn to us for civil legal services needs.

Because of the high volume of walk-ins and calls we receive, we face challenges in capturing data about these requests. In particular, it is challenging to collect complete data about applicants we are turning away due to lack of resources and those who receive an immediate external referral without going through any intake process. As we have expanded our use of remote intake tools, we continue to explore new ways of capturing information about virtual and in person “walk-in” clients, including those who call into our hotline but are ultimately not connected with our advocates.



All of our intake methods encompass the holistic, and checklist approach. Prospective clients and community members are connected with experienced, interdisciplinary advocates with the guidance of checklists that ensure we ask about all relevant areas of a client's life. Advocates enter intake information into PIKA, our interdisciplinary case management system, which allows us to track cases and outcomes. When we begin working with clients through a criminal, family or immigration case, staff members use an arraignment or intake checklists to determine how a client's case affects other areas of their lives. When clients come to us through the community, staff members use checklists to ask questions about not only the specific matter that has brought a client to us, but also uncover additional needs that they may have through similar checklists.

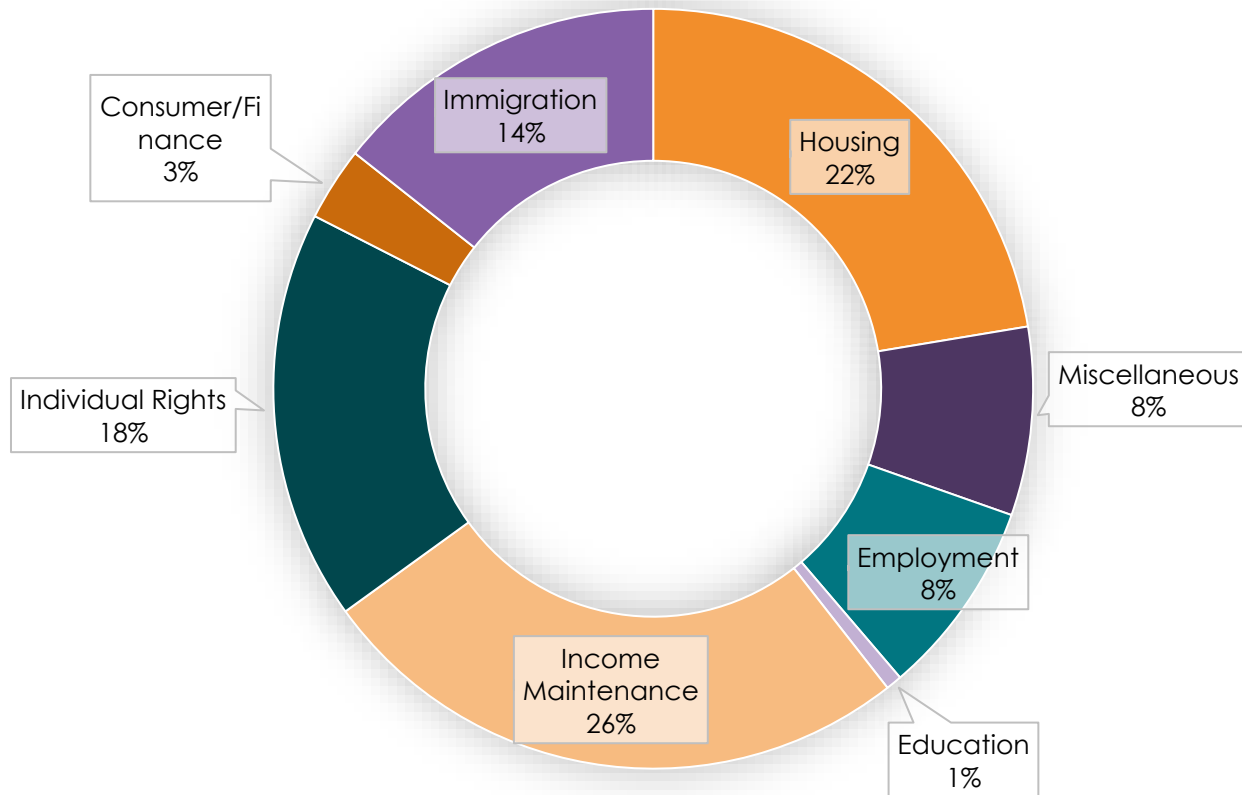
These checklists were designed by interdisciplinary experts so we could address the variety of areas where a client may need advice, support, or representation. When advocates enter client information into our case management system, they create a single, central record for the client that can be shared with other advocates to speed up the referral process. And when advocates enter information about clients' legal needs into this system, they prompt seamless electronic referrals to ensure that clients' needs are met.

For our Right to Counsel continues to experience an uptick in housing cases, we have both modified and enhanced our intake approach given that Housing court has adopted a hybrid approach to our initial intake, having our team staff both in-person and through virtual appearances. We have a shared excel spreadsheet via SharePoint that tracks the Court calendar and is updated from information obtained from NYSCEF and wed-civil e-courts, during the Court intake shift, advocates, paralegals and supervisors communicate contemporaneously through Microsoft Teams chats and interactive intake forms are used when interviewing prospective clients, while a second team of staff, advocates, and supervisors staff an all day in court shift from 9AM until 5PM.

For our benefits access team, they receive walk-ins on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays and also connect with caller through our benefits hotline, where callers can leave messages between 9-5, Monday-Friday.

Our intake methods have transition to a hybrid approach since being fully remote during Covid. To make it easier for clients to access our services, particularly when technology is a limiting factor, we have our community reception and intake space on a modified basis to provide intake services for walk-in clients.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



CASE EXAMPLES

Income Maintenance: Our Civil Action team represented Ms. Rios in a nonpayment case and avoided eviction of a single mother with minor children that faced chronic health challenges and no future ability to pay rent. Ms. Rios lived in her current apartment for over 17 years. For her 15-year-old son, Anthony, this is the only home he has ever known.

After contracting Covid-19, Ms. Rios developed several chronic health conditions, including severe tinnitus, limited arm mobility, and chronic migraines, all of which interfered with her ability to work, and therefore ability to make rental payments. Due to her lack of employment income, Ms. Rios fell behind on rent and ultimately found herself in housing court facing eviction. Ms. Rios' apartment is unregulated, and as such, she had very limited defenses and protections in her nonpayment case. However, it was very important to her to stay in her current unit because her son, who has autism, struggles with change and would have found it very difficult to relocate; he has a community that has learned to work with him, aid his needs, and facilitate his learning development, just to mention a few things.

Because Ms. Rios receives cash assistance and has a minor child, our civil attorney was able to work with our Benefits Team to apply for and obtain a FHEPS voucher for Ms. Rios, including thousands in arrears and an ability to afford the apartment long term, resolving her case that would have otherwise likely resulted in an eviction and displacement of her family.

Housing: Mr. Feliz was detained on Rikers Island following a fire in his supportive housing apartment. The fire department declared it an "intentional" fire. According to the supportive housing provider, Mr. Feliz, who has mental health impairments, was decompensating for months. Mr. Feliz shared that there was a padlock on his door and when he tried to break it and get back into his apartment, the police showed up and arrested him. Given the circumstances of the case, the criminal attorney looped in our civil attorney and civil social worker who connected with the supportive housing provider to talk through Mr. Feliz's case, and they insisted Mr. Feliz needed a higher level of care and offered him a different apartment vacancy in level II supportive housing. Mr. Feliz refused the vacancy, saying that it was his legal right to return to his apartment.

With more zealous advocacy and several more meetings with the supportive housing provider, our team argued that Mr. Feliz needed to stay in his original apartment and threatened litigation. The supportive housing provider maintained that the landlord had not only illegally locked Mr. Feliz out but also the provider itself. The civil team obtained their attorney's information and argued with the attorney explaining that arson was not a charge in criminal court and that he should not have been locked out or arrested, for that matter and prepared to take legal action to create accountability around this circumstance. Although the supportive housing provider and their attorney continued to say there was nothing they could do for Mr. Feliz, our team continued advocacy efforts until he was given a new key and access to his apartment and could full return to his home, avoiding displacement and homelessness.

OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

178,952

people benefited
from

**Web-Based
Assistance**

We continue to invest in a variety of educational services to help community members and clients understand what their rights are and what services are available to them in an empowering way. Our community education and outreach aim to help community members understand their rights, the available resources, and which problems might benefit from legal services and to identify additional resources available. Through active outreach and education, we equip community members with knowledge that can help them avoid legal issues altogether and assist them in understanding what type of help to seek when legal issues arise.

We provide community legal education through workshops, outreach at our community events, and printed or online materials and email newsletters that help people navigate the legal system more effectively. This education and outreach draws upon what we learn from clients, highlighting areas where we see common civil legal needs, such as access to emergency benefits, employment and housing issues. At its most effective, equipped with this information, community members can often avoid legal issues altogether. When a legal issue does arise, they are better equipped to navigate it and to seek out advocacy where needed.

2,434

people benefited
from

**Community
Legal
Education**

687

people benefited
from

**Pro Se
Assistance**

Our Right to Counsel Housing Team services include support for pro-se representation where we cannot take on a client's case. In particular, we provide resources for pro se representation to "walk-in" clients via our community intake team and hotline and disseminate pro se information and materials through outreach and clinics. We have developed a robust internal resource bank for sharing information, helping all advocates connect quickly with the answers and documents they need to support their clients.

Beyond providing community members with legal information, we engage them in community organizing and provide the tools and resources they need to build collective power for change. Over the past few years, we've built upon our existing connections with the Bronx community and our longstanding commitment to learn from our clients to build a new approach to community organizing and development of our community engagement. Recognizing that those closest to legal systems are best positioned both to identify problems and to spearhead solutions, we have begun to organize former clients, their families and community members to mobilize for change. Our Director of Community Organizing and Director of Community Engagement are experienced organizers from the Bronx who have experienced legal systems firsthand, and they use their perspectives and expertise to build community power among Bronx residents.

By embedding community organizing and engagement within our office, we combine the power of grassroots organizing with the expertise of our advocates and a range of strategies for change. As community members identify problems and potential solutions, our team is ready to implement those solutions through strategic communications, impact litigation, and legislative advocacy. We reach hundreds of community members each year through advocacy, clinics, and legal education events.

BLOC Housing Forum: The Bronx Leadership & Organizing Center (BLOC), of which Bronx Defenders is a founding member, held a Bronx Housing Forum to raise awareness about the Bronx housing crisis. Bringing together more than 150 community residents, the forum aimed to support participants in learning and advocating for their rights, developing community organizing strategies and having access to housing resources. Bronx youth from the BLOC Community Advisory Council, took a leading role in the event to speak out about the impact of housing and homelessness on the youth, and the many ways that the lack of housing impedes every aspect of life.

Know Your Rights on Fair Chance, Employment Discrimination & Tools that promote reentry: Our CAP Employment & Reentry Counsel organized his community Know Your Rights Clinic on the NYC Fair Chance Act and tools that promote reentry for employment. He coordinated three events in collaboration with the Osbourne Association, Sen. Carl Heastie's office and the Law Firms Davis, Polk & Cleary. The first was a hybrid event, giving the option for virtual and in person participation and the second and third were in person events.

Voting is Power! Voter Education: Events that have seen hundreds of attendees. These are focused on people with criminal legal system contact, though all are welcome, and so the panel discussions trace the history of disenfranchisement in New York from slavery to NY's earlier codification of felony disenfranchisement than other states', and the current state of voter eligibility for those with felony convictions and those who are incarcerated in jails. This event had a spike in turnout that we believe is related to including vendors who tabled and more concerted outreach to elected officials to turn out their constituents.

TECHNOLOGY

The Bronx Defenders uses a Case Management System (CMS) for the recording and tracking of information related to cases, clients, and activities. Information is collected by staff through court forms or client interviews and then entered into the CMS. The Data Team at BxD is then responsible for the management, reporting and analysis of this information. The Data Team works closely with the legal practices to understand which metrics are most meaningful to track, and to consistently improve tracking, understanding, and performance through data reports and analytics.

BxD strives to use data in ways that go beyond contractual reporting obligations. For the past four years, we have been leveraging a new AI (Artificial Intelligence) driven BI (Business Intelligence) tool to more deeply understand the work of the Civil Practice and our clients' needs. We have particularly focused on understanding how the Civil Practice operates within BxD's Holistic Model – allowing us to fine-tune referral relationships and more closely track trends in overlapping areas where clients need support from multiple legal teams. We have also used this tool to automate repetitive tasks related to data quality and reporting, giving our administrative staff more time for client intake. We have also expanded our use of publicly available data to understand the context our team is working in. This is particularly true in the context of housing representation, where we have been able to track court trends since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic through multiple legislative changes.

BxD has also embarked on an exciting partnership with Legal Server, a provider of Case Management System (CMS) technology. This transition gives us an opportunity to design our site to capture the most critical information for our client's needs today. Our partner is committed to continuously improve their software and it's integrations so that BxD can take advantage of modern software capabilities, such as automated court date and appointment reminders for clients, that can have a real impact on our clients' success.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

The Bronx Defenders' Information Technology Department purchases necessary computer hardware and software to keep up with the pace of cybersecurity requirements and organizational needs of our clients. The IOLA Technology Grant was integral in allowing The Bronx Defenders to take a giant leap forward in achieving our strategic technology goals. First and foremost, the funding allowed us to kick-start the implementation of a data warehouse and enhance our data analytics capabilities through an investment in ThoughtSpot and in partnership with Legal Server to implement a robust legal case management system, something that we anticipate will significantly impact the delivery of holistic defense. With the data warehouse, we are creating a tool that will allow for the sharing and cross-referencing client data across different practice areas. The data warehouse changes that by pooling our data on clients' interaction with The Bronx Defenders and merging it with various court, foster care, educational, and health data. We, therefore, create a more complete and integrated record of our client's involvement with multiple systems. By allowing for robust querying and report generation, the systems will facilitate easy access to information that will inform case strategies, team and client decision-making, policy work, and training. This increased access to information and analysis will revolutionize how we use information to represent our clients. We plan to implement it by the end of 2024 and expand it over the next few years.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

We maintained our invaluable collaboration with the dedicated Attorneys from Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP, and Affiliates (Skadden). Before the onset of COVID-19, these lawyers tirelessly performed in-person intakes at Bronx Defenders' and met with clients and community members seeking redress. Post-COVID, we seamlessly transitioned our in-person to a virtual clinic in the spring of 2021. We created a robust referral system that captures community and Org-wide referrals. On a bi-weekly basis, our Liaison partners with Skadden's Liaisons to pair Skadden volunteers with The Bronx Defender's Civil Legal Advocates (CLA's) to facilitate and complete Notice of Claim filings for our clients and community members. Since our virtual transition, we have conducted virtual-live trainings for Skadden's new pool of summer associates recruited to volunteer for our Notice of Claim Clinic each year. We will continue our yearly recruitment and host another Summer Associates cohort this year.

In 2023, we trained and hosted additional volunteers due to Skadden's partnership with their corporate partners. Last year, the Skadden Summer Associates conducted an impact survey, which included calling almost 200 previous clients who filed claims with our volunteers. The focus is to inform future advocacy on notices of claims and police misconduct and to enhance and deepen how The Bronx Defenders supports individuals harmed by the police.

188

attorneys
volunteered **1,200** hours

15

law students
volunteered **500** hours

24

other volunteers
volunteered **400** hours

This year, we created a new partnership with Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP and exceeded our goal to provide meaningful comprehensive reentry legal services in the Bronx community through reentry clinics. In addition to Davis, we worked with Cleary Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton and the Center for Employment Opportunities and the Southern District of New York pro bono program to provide services. As part of this partnership, we held informational sessions at a variety of community-based organizations, reaching well over 100 systems-involved community members, and conducting intakes on the spot for 58 individuals.

With a reputation for matching high-quality attorneys with cases in which they can make a real difference for the clients and community we serve; we have partnered with 188 pro bono attorneys on over 186 civil case matters in the reporting period dedicating over 1200 pro bono hours. To build on this success, we have created pro bono projects that offer our partners an opportunity to focus on specific types of cases, such as police misconduct or removal defense. The process of placing cases and planning these projects helps us turn our partners' existing skills and interests into meaningful outcomes for our clients.

In addition to pro bono volunteers from law firms, we host interns and pro bono scholars throughout the year: we have a robust summer intern program and also work with interns during the year. In addition, we work with volunteers through our Holistic Defense Externship, a year-long seminar and externship for Columbia Law students who learn about our approach and work with staff attorneys to represent and support clients through our holistic model. This includes significant engagement with civil legal services and an in-depth exploration of how civil legal needs relate to the criminal, family and immigration legal systems.

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

To support clients in navigating the complex challenges they face, we collaborate with a wide range of partner organizations. We refer clients to community-based organizations that can provide services beyond what we offer, from food pantries to inpatient substance abuse treatment centers. As subject matter experts in a range of complex and intersecting issues, we provide crucial information to fellow advocates and directly to the community - as when we partner with tenant groups, schools, and faith communities to provide trainings on navigating police interactions or understanding immigration law. Our partners also frequently refer clients to us, deepening the connections we have with other community-based organizations. And we collaborate with these partners to look beyond individual clients and pursue larger systemic change on issues such as bail reform and equity in the child welfare system.

Over the past year, we have continued to strengthen existing partnerships and develop new ones. As a member of Leap, and as part of the steering committee of this coalition, we are committed to collaborative work and diversity and innovation in organizational models, delivery systems, and methodology, and we recognize the need to maintain community-based service delivery. With Leap, we work closely with the Legal Aid Society, LSNYC, NYLAG and a number of other civil legal organizations to share information and collaborate regarding City and Statewide advocacy. We are members of the New York State Legal Services Coalition and work with other organizations on statewide advocacy, including advocacy to prevent the sweep of IOLA funds this year.

We are co-chairs of and continued to work closely with the Coalition of Reentry Advocates (CORA) to participate in statewide policy advocacy efforts around reentry and a co-chairs of the coalition. We co-founded Bronx Solidarity! a coalition of over 12 tenant legal services organizations in the Bronx and tackled racism and incivility head on in Bronx Housing Court. We also co-organized a city-wide coalition of advocates who practice at the Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings (OATH) and host the listserv for advocates, mostly focused on strategies around defending TLC Licensed Drivers, co-organized a coalition of city-wide advocates related to supportive housing and strategies to support tenants who have mental health impairments living in supportive housing settings (“SHOUT”) and have organized city-wide advocates who do civil forfeiture work. We are members of the Right to Counsel Coalition, supporters of Housing Justice for all and members of the Fair Chance for Housing

coalition to both share strategies, share resources and to fight for broader policy and other change on behalf of our clients.

In coalition with other reentry advocates, we achieved victory on the Clean Slate Act, a bill we had been working on for several years which will clear long-standing barriers for New Yorkers with old convictions to pursue meaningful and sustainable employment. As part of our Community Day of Action, we organized impacted Bronxites to educate their legislators on the barriers that past criminal convictions created to sustainable and meaningful employment. We are pleased to report that the Clean Slate Act passed both houses and was signed into law by the Governor at the end of November 2023.

We create, organize and participate in these partnerships and coalitions to learn from our peers, to cross refer issues, to build opportunities for collective advocacy and to avoid duplication of efforts.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 4,073,339

IOLA Grant	\$ 312,500
City & County	\$ 2,744,430
State	\$ 713,909
Foundations	\$ 302,500

