

# **Center for Family Representation**

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**2023 – 2024**

**Report**

# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

CFR primarily represents low-income parents, who are summoned to Family Court in Queens or Manhattan, whose children are at risk of entering, remaining in or re-entering foster care, because ACS alleges their children are at risk of maltreatment. Beginning in 2022 CFR began representing low-income parents in the Bronx in cases where the Bronx Defenders are unable to. ACS disproportionately investigates and prosecutes Black and Brown Families. CFR provides parents with holistic legal and social work support to lessen the devastating impact of CPS involvement and consequences of foster care.

In FY24, with our team model of a lawyer, social worker and a system-impacted parent advocate/mentor, we closed 1,746 cases, benefitting more than 4,153 people. 635 families reunified, 220 avoided a finding of neglect/and or abuse, 782 families avoided placement of children in foster care, and 8 avoided a termination of their parental rights. We completed 14 family defense appeals. Indigent parents involved with the ACS often confront interrelated collateral issues, rooted in poverty, such as unstable housing, financial insecurity, or immigration problems; these have the potential to undermine a family’s success. To address these, our Home for Good (HG) program provides legal and social work services in housing, public benefits, and immigration. HG staff closed 11 full representation housing cases, 9 income maintenance cases related to public benefits, and 20 immigration cases. Coordinated HG services mean we quickly avert crisis, and clients do not lose precious time having to access services from other agencies where there may be long wait lists or where practitioners lack expertise in ACS cases.



**Service Area:** Manhattan, Queens, & the Bronx

**Population Served:** Low-Income Parents

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**

Total Staff: 148.85 Lawyers: 68.3

Paralegals: 9

Others: 71.55

Our Community Advocacy Project (CAP) represents parents during an ACS investigation and in attempting to clear or modify maltreatment records with the State Central Register (SCR), to improve parents' employment opportunities; in FY24, we completed 173 cases of ACS investigation defense and 241 SCR cases. We completed three cycles of multi-week virtual and in-person onboarding and training of new staff in the reporting period.

CFR continued to keep approximately 57% of our clients' children out of foster care. For those who entered care, their median length of stay was less than 7.25 months (far shorter than the NYC median of 11.5 months prior to CFR becoming a high-volume legal service provider). We believe we have saved the City over \$159 million dollars in reduced foster care costs since 2007. CFR does not track monetary benefits gained for clients, but we connect clients with public assistance, housing, utilities and employment help, and many other services. We provided clients with donations of children's clothing, diapers, school supplies, toys, and hygiene and cleaning products through partnerships with the Good+ Foundation and Proskauer Rose LLP. In the last year, due to our private fundraising efforts, we have been able to institute a Client Emergency Fund. Our Client Emergency Fund allows us to support our clients immediate needs such as groceries, clothing, cleaning supplies, etc., in a timely manner. It has been incredibly helpful to our clients to be able to respond to requests so quickly.

## DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

CFR provides electronic fliers in several languages with contact information for parents. Our website also contains this information. ACS notifies us each day of cases it will file. We have continued to be provisionally assigned in court each day, so that no matter when a parent calls we can begin working with them. In Manhattan and Queens, we are increasingly able to meet new clients in person in court though we "meet" many over the phone and conduct intake via that means of communication. In the Bronx, our first contact with clients is still overwhelmingly telephonic or virtual. The intake process begins over the phone and may continue in person if the client is able to travel to court.



4,153

people  
benefited  
from



1,746

legal  
cases  
closed

Judges are increasingly requiring that parents appear in person at intake. We often continue intake in person after the appearance in order to get more information, arrange visits, and exchange contact information.

We continue to receive calls to our informational hotline. In FY24 we had 298 calls. CFR attorneys and social workers are on “intake” five days a week, so parents nearly always connect with CFR within hours of ACS involvement. Absent conflicts or financial ineligibility, CFR accepts assignments. At intake or as needs arise, staff make immediate referrals to HG staff, who conduct intake through calls and video, but our immigration team increasingly conducts intake in person, in our offices. CAP clients are usually referred by other providers, a parent’s self-referral or after virtual community based presentations. We attempt to speak to clients in their native language or dialect and translate many documents into several languages. 29 of CFR’s staff speak a language other than English through both remote and in-person services.

## CASE EXAMPLES

**Immigration:** In order to become an American citizen, one requirement is that an applicant must demonstrate “good moral character” for the five-year period immediately preceding their application for naturalization up to the time of the Oath of Allegiance. Factors that can result in an application being denied include having a criminal history or failing to pay child support or taxes. When applying to naturalize, Ms. D’s past criminal history and struggle to pay child support for her daughter reflected poorly against her in the eyes of immigration officers. CFR’s stepped in to prepare Ms. D, both for her written English and civics tests and to answer questions from the immigration officer assigned to her case, who requested information about her family court and criminal history. CFR assisted Ms. D with collecting the many documents she needed to present for the request for evidence from immigration officers, including proof of child support payments, cleared orders of protection, cleared and sealed criminal records, and other receipts.

Every issue that was brought up by immigration officers needed to be addressed, and CFR worked tirelessly to collect the necessary paperwork from the relevant agencies and to show that Ms. D was making positive changes to her life. Despite past struggles and entanglements with systems of policing, Ms. D was working hard on herself to improve her living conditions. Ms. D and her daughter maintain a very close relationship, and she has continued to provide as much care and support as she can under difficult circumstances.

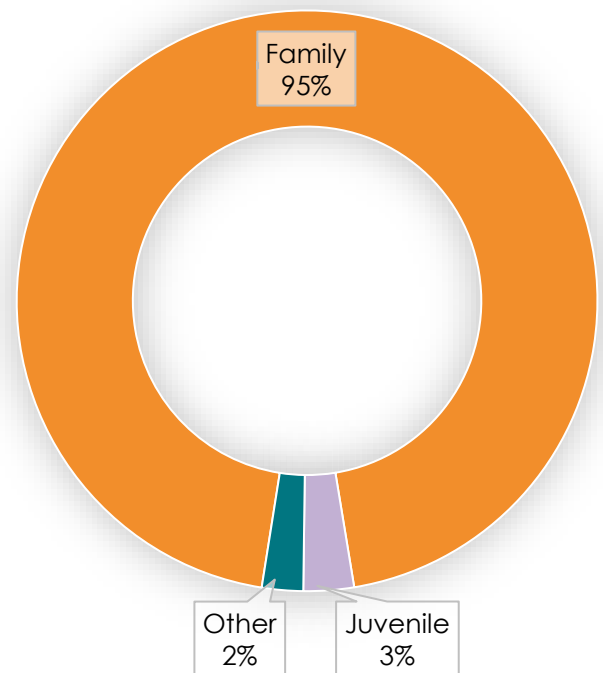
Ms. D has also begun working as a home health aide and is studying to become a nurse. After considering all of the documentation that CFR put forth, Ms. D's naturalization application was approved. Ms. D's oath ceremony took place in September 2023.

**Family Civil Defense (Housing):** Ms. P was referred to CFR in August 2023. After a large real estate investment company purchased her building in Harlem, Ms. P came home one evening to find her locks changed and an eviction notice posted on her door. When she arrived at housing court, she saw dozens of tenants from her building there. The judge granted Ms. P limited access to gather her personal items and two dogs, who had been locked inside the apartment. Once she and her partner had their possessions, they went to a shelter.

CFR's civil team quickly realized that many of these tenants, including Ms. P, were targeted by the building's management company because they were rent stabilized. The management company was notorious for clearing buildings and trying to use legal processes to push apartments out of rent stabilization to market rates. Furthermore, the management company's attorney was rude and dismissive. She was visibly frustrated because Ms. P had not just given up and gone away, which many tenants do because they lack support and resources, allowing the building owners to profit. She offered a typical settlement where Ms. P would pay rental arrears, legal and marshal's fees in an impossibly short period of time. Negotiations quickly broke down.

Over nearly three months, CFR filed court orders to prevent Ms. P from losing her apartment. We worked with the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to ascertain why her rent support had failed. One of her children turned 19 and her household composition had changed, reducing her benefit. HRA staff was also determined to not let her lose the apartment. After Ms. P's benefits were recertified, CFR received checks from the HRA that our staff hand-carried to Brooklyn so Ms. P could be restored to her apartment. Because of CFR's persistence, Ms. P was able to return home after a shelter stay that negatively impacted her health. If Ms. P had not had people fighting by her side, she would have lost her apartment, like many other tenants do.

## CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



## OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

CFR broadens the scope of our practices and policy efforts to improve the administration of justice and address a variety of challenges faced by families involved in the child welfare and family court systems. The Community Advocacy Project (CAP) provides direct legal representation and social work advocacy for parents in Queens, Manhattan and the Bronx during an ACS investigation. With the primary goal of avoiding the removal of a child or the filing of a family court prosecution the CAP team supports families during their investigations by addressing a range of concerns that come up. This support can include community know your rights presentations, informing parents of their rights, connecting parents to services, mitigating any crisis as it comes up, communicating directly with ACS workers and attending meetings. In FY24, we've closed 241 cases, amending or sealing approximately 95% of them. In CAP we also assist parents in modifying or completely sealing their SCR records by representing them directly in the fair hearing process and providing education. CFR continues to be a leader in providing training and technical assistance, particularly in assisting other jurisdictions in replicating our service model. CFR provided a virtual and in-person technical assistance and training series to the Monroe County Public Defenders' office in 2023.

**Community Legal Education:** We continue to offer Know Your Rights training sessions and SCR information sessions for community partner organizations. In FY24, CFR presented to a total of 131 community members and distributed legal education materials at each presentation. Additionally, CFR trained 281 in person non-attorney practitioners and community members and 59 non-attorney practitioners and community members virtually across the city, state, and country in FY24. In total, CFR conducted 36 training sessions and presentations for 987 participants including all practitioners and community members.

**471**  
people  
benefited from  
**Community  
Legal  
Education**

In April, CFR staff presented at the CUNY Fatherhood Academy (CFA) at LaGuardia Community College on what to do during an ACS investigation or when fighting for custody rights. CFA is a free program providing holistic support to un- and underemployed young fathers (ages 18-30). Many of the attendees have experienced investigations by the family policing system, both as children and as parents, and were eager to share their experiences on how the system negatively impacted their lives.

In January, CFR conducted a Know Your Rights presentation for Bedford Green House/Project Renewal housing site staff. Every family – especially low-income families and communities most likely to be targeted by ACS – deserves to know their rights when ACS makes first contact. In January, CFR joined Just Making a Change for Families (JMACforFamilies) to table at a Community Day at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Brooklyn. Attendees enjoyed free lunch and painting and play therapy sessions, and were provided with resources and materials on dismantling the family policing system.

**135**  
people  
benefited from  
**Pro Se  
Assistance**

Our CAP team also did a presentation for the Community Education Council District 28 in Queens for parents and school staff. Parts of this district include Jamaica Queens, the second highest-ranking district in consolidated investigations citywide. They provided an overview of the racial inequities in the family regulation system, an overview of our free services, and parent's rights. In June, CFR presented at the Parent Action Conference. The conference was hosted by Class Size Matters, a non profit that advocates for smaller classes in NYC, and NYC Kids PAC.

## TECHNOLOGY

In this FY24, our organization has made significant advancements in technology and training. We've implemented RingCentral's VoIP phone platform, enhancing communication efficiency and client access. Additionally, we've developed an in-house cybersecurity training program to bolster our defense against evolving cyber threats. These improvements have streamlined operations, leading to quicker response times and improved service delivery for our clients, while ensuring the security of their data.

The IOLA Technology Grant supported the procurement of the RingCentral VoIP system and the associated setup and training costs for our staff. Even without the support of this grant, our organization recognized the necessity of upgrading our communication technology to meet the evolving needs of our constituents. While the primary focus of this expenditure was on improving internal communication workflows, it also directly supported our strategic technology goals by enhancing our overall operational efficiency and client service communications. With a more robust communication infrastructure in place, we are better positioned to achieve our organizational objectives and deliver quality services to our clients.

## PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

5

attorneys  
volunteered **399** hours

10

law students  
volunteered **3,476** hours

2

other volunteers  
volunteered **1,416** hours

Kirkland & Ellis also offered its pro bono services for a wide variety of CFR needs and is currently assisting with a real estate issue. For many years now CFR has benefited from pro bono services from Seyfarth Shaw on a variety of Human Resource topics. Winston & Strawn has continued to work with CFR, at a pro bono rate. As well, we are currently establishing a pro bono relationship with Cleary Gottlieb surrounding State Central Registry litigation. During FY24, CFR had 10 law student interns, 2 MSW social work interns.

## SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

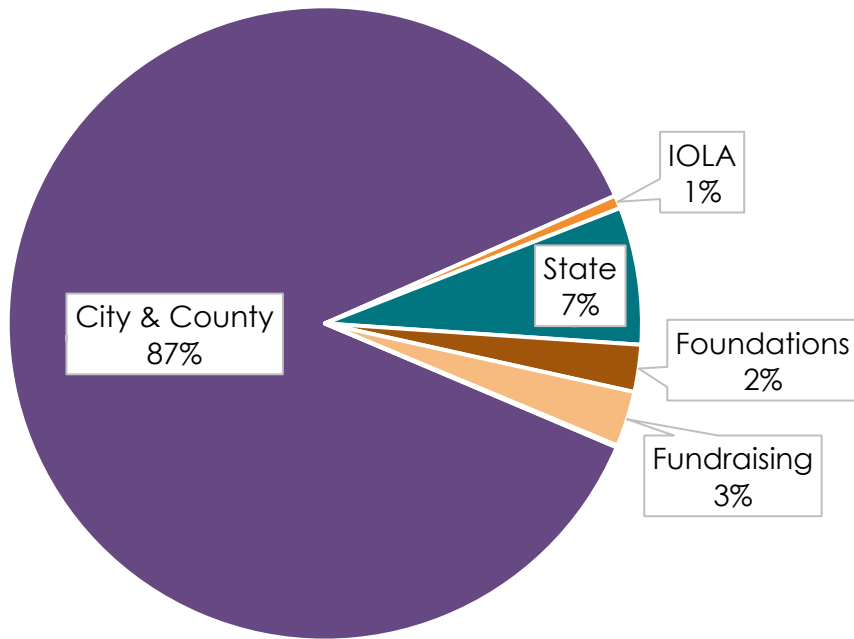
CFR had two attorneys serving on the New York City's Bar Association's Juvenile Justice Committee. CFR's Managing Director of Litigation sits on the New York City Bar Association's Children and the Law Committee. In FY24 CFR's Director of Youth Defense Practice was appointed to the Mayor's Committee for Juvenile Justice.

CFR has partnerships with a variety of community based agencies. Partnerships include making referrals to one another and conducting or hosting trainings. Some of our current partners include: New York County Defender Services, Up Next, Single Parent Resource Center, Rising Ground, Puerto Rican Family Institute, Chances for Children. New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE), Ackerman, Fortune Society, Child Center of New York (CCNY), Greenwich House, New Horizons, Realization Center, Resolutions, Sanctuary for Families, Samaritan Village-Veritas House, Forestdale's Fathering Initiative, Strong Mothers Program, and ABC Dyadic Therapy program, New York Presbyterian Hospital's Toddler Infant Parent Program, Rise, Safe Horizon, The Door, Steps to End Family Violence, Latin Women in Action, New York Psychotherapy and Counseling Center, Manhattan Family Justice Center, Edwards Mentoring, Green Hope, Odyssey House, Acacia Network (La Casita), and more.



# CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

**\$20,110,452**



|                                  |                     |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>IOLA Funding</b>              | <b>\$135,000</b>    |
| <b>City &amp; County Funding</b> | <b>\$17,497,566</b> |
| <b>State Funding</b>             | <b>\$1,408,754</b>  |
| <b>Foundations</b>               | <b>\$482,500</b>    |
| <b>Fundraising</b>               | <b>\$568,260</b>    |
| <b>Other Funding</b>             | <b>\$18,372</b>     |