

LEGAL AID BUREAU OF BUFFALO

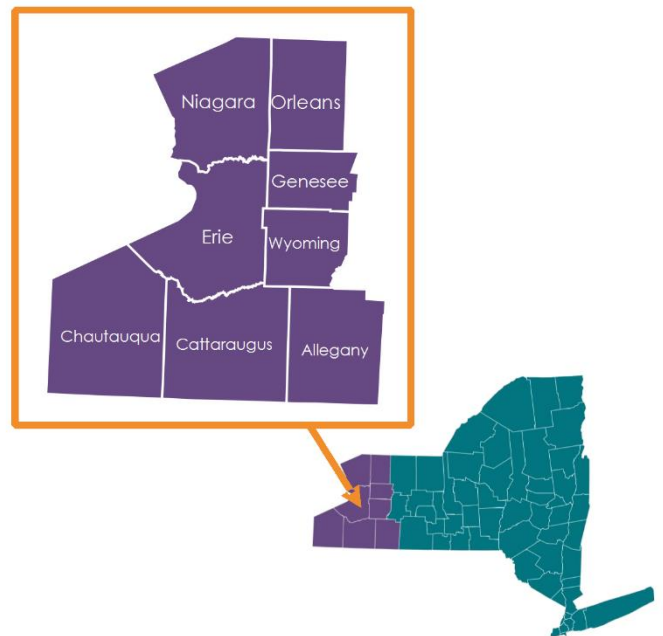
**2023 – 2024
Report**

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

From April 1, 2023, through March 31, 2024, Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo (LABB) intake included 8,030 civil cases. Through our online application portal we received 1,959 of these intakes, a 12% increase over last year. Another 4,652 intakes were facilitated by phone or mail, and another 1,419 were done in person either at our office, on-site clinics, or at courthouses. Only 843 of the applicants were rejected during the year, of which 55% were rejected due to conflicts of interest (317) or financial ineligibility (143), and 45% were rejected because the applicant cancelled or no-showed (85) or they were requesting services that did not fall under our program’s priorities.

LABB provided advice or representation to a total of 11,907 men, women, and children in 6,966 different cases in Western New York. Of these, 3,711 were cases assisting people in general civil matters and 3,255 were cases representing children in Erie County Family Court. In addition, the Civil Legal Services Unit (CLSU) provided hotline services for 7,266 people. Referrals were provided to 3,315 people. Community legal education, primarily through our regular legal columns in community newspapers (510,228), was provided to 521,508 individuals, and pro se assistance was provided to 9,924 persons. Our web-based assistance was accessed by 7,437 people.

Outreach and in-person events, including clinics, are now fully operational. We've resumed regular legal walk-in clinics at the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library and various Buffalo community sites such as Belmont Housing, WNYCOSH, Resource Council of WNY, Buffalo Resiliency Center, Erie County Holding Center, and Veterans One-Stop Center.



Service Area: Western New York

Population Served: General Low-Income Population

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:

Total Staff: 51	Lawyers: 33
Paralegals: 10	Others: 8

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

Case Example #1, Post-Matrimonial Enforcement: Nancy is the mother of two children and a self-employed shop owner. She was divorced seven years ago and based on her ex's annual income of \$440,000, her settlement agreement provided that, in addition to child support, she receive spousal support of \$10,750 per month, 100% taxable to her as income in the year received. After years of litigation to enforce the agreement against her ex, her resources were exhausted and she was referred to our office by her retained attorney. At the time of referral, her ex owed \$327,000 in spousal support, as well as significant unpaid child support.

We prevailed in a contempt hearing and requested immediate incarceration. To avoid incarceration, the ex made an immediate payment of \$96,000, and we modified the settlement agreement to shift 60% of the tax burden on the spousal support back to the ex, so our client had to claim only 40% as income. We then set a two-year repayment schedule for the balance of spousal support and child support. Given this outcome, her accountant estimated her tax savings at between \$25,000 and \$30,000 per year. This is a benefit that could only be achieved through negotiation strategies and not by trial.

11,907

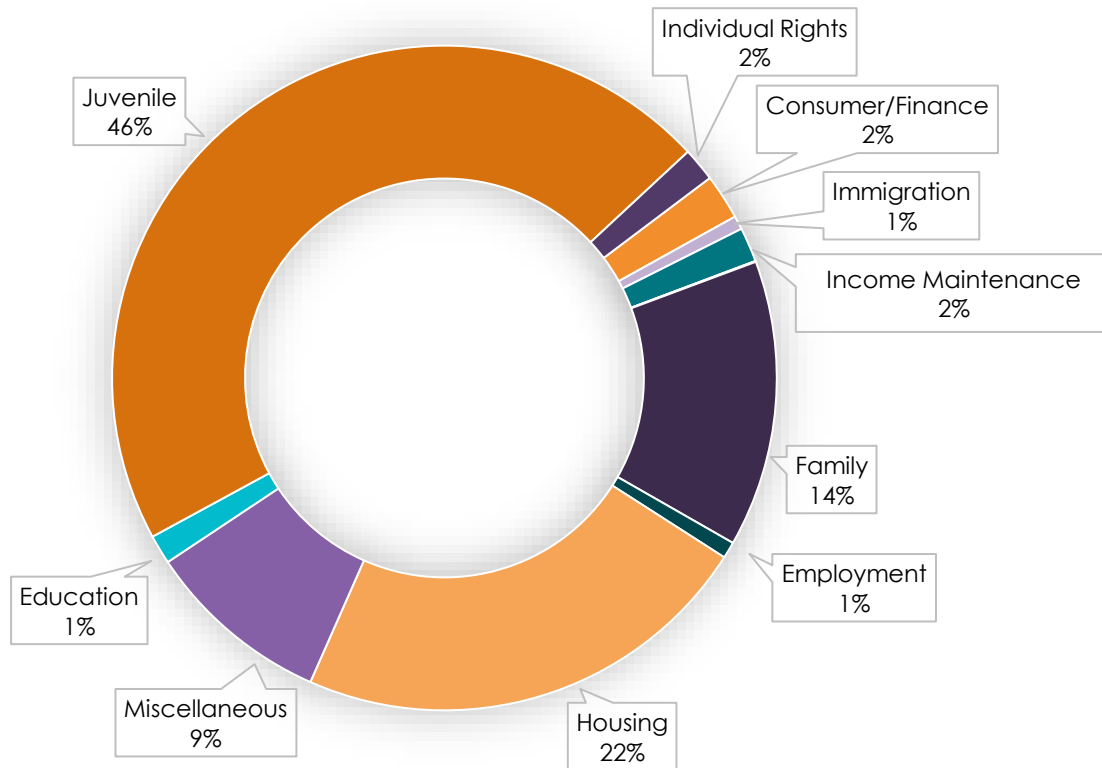
people
benefited
from

6,966

legal cases
closed

Case Example #2, Education Advocacy Program: "Samuel" is a 15-year-old youth who is placed by his school district in a specialized highly structured "agency day school" for children with disabilities. As a youth with autism, Sam became hyper-focused on worries about school safety and shootings and expressed his concerns to a school aide who supervised his study hall. The aide complained to school administrators that she felt threatened, leading to Sam's long-term suspension from school.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



The agency school indicated to Sam's school district that it was not equipped to serve Sam's needs and requested his placement in another setting. The aide further reported Sam to the police, which led to filing of juvenile delinquency charges against him. Our education and juvenile delinquency attorneys worked jointly to represent Sam in both school and Family Court, gathering Sam's records and investigating the events.

At the Family Court hearing, the school aide acknowledged that she was unaware of Sam's disability and the terms of his Individualized Education Program (IEP) and misunderstood his fears about school shootings. The Family Court dismissed the charges against Sam. The aide has since left the employ of the school. Our education attorney achieved Sam's swift return to school, facilitated his participation in a restorative justice process and worked collaboratively to ensure his successful re-entry. He was warmly welcomed back and recently was recognized by staff as the "student of the month." But for our education advocacy, Sam would have endured a far longer school suspension and loss of access to effective and stable schooling.

OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

Community Legal Education: We conduct in-person presentations with local community organizations. Our Re-Entry Project offers training and legal education at Federal Probation Services, Ready, Set, Work, Parole Orientation, Service Link Stop and Collins Correctional Facility. Our Veterans Project holds legal education events at Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court, Veterans One-Stop, and WNY Heroes. We present regularly at local community events, such as City of Buffalo Inaugural Black Men's Empowerment Summit, Veterans Stand Down, Youth Empowerment Seminar and Buffalo Afghan Support Center, and present regularly at community locations such as Frank E. Merriweather Library, Jr. Library, WNY Resource Council, and Parent Network. Presentations are also made regularly to students at the University at Buffalo School of Law and School of Social Work. We also had the honor to present at the NYS Judicial Institute, Judge's Training again this year. Over the past year, we've presented to 2,824 individuals on-line and in person, and distributed 8,456 legal brochures. In addition, we publish articles in the Bee Newspapers three times a year, and reached 510,228 readers this contract year.

Pro Se Assistance: Pro se assistance service is available at walk-in clinics in locations such as Belmont Housing, Veterans One-Stop, Veterans Treatment Court, WNY Heroes, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, WNYCOSH, and our Supreme Court Help Desks across six counties in the 8th Judicial District. Our office also provides walk-in pro se assistance at our office, and remote and telephone assistance is available. This year, we assisted 6,629 individuals at walk-in clinics and court help centers, and distributed 3,295 self-help materials.

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**Pro Se
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**Web-Based
Assistance**

Web-Based Assistance: Through our website you can access various FAQ's and Know Your Rights brochures. This information was accessed 5,478 times. In addition, 1,959 people applied for our services on-line through our intake portal. We are currently undergoing a complete redesign of our website during which these resources will be updated and reorganized with the goal of making them more easily accessible to the public.

Supreme Court Help Desks and Clinics: Our Supreme Court Help Desks in Cattaraugus, Allegany, Chautauqua, Niagara, Genesee, and Wyoming Counties, along with clinics at Belmont, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, Service Link Stop, and WNYCOSH, offer individuals the opportunity to meet with an attorney for advice on legal issues. Our attorneys provide counsel, help with applications, and conduct assessments to identify further legal or nonlegal needs, offering referrals as needed. These services are available at least once a month at each location.

Veteran Community Outreach: We conduct bi-monthly clinics at Veterans One-Stop and WNY Heroes, Inc., and monthly at the Veterans Treatment Court. Veterans receive legal advice, informational brochures, self-help information, and assistance with online applications.

Educational Materials and Outreach: We are committed to expanding our reach and strengthening organizational ties to better serve communities with limited access to civil legal services due to social, linguistic, or geographical barriers. We maintain a growing library of legal education brochures and Know Your Rights and FAQs. We collect information and resource materials from other organizations such as the County of Erie, City of Buffalo, Buffalo HOPE, NYSTEACHS.org, and numerous others. These materials are distributed in courts and at outreach events, and are also available in our lobbies and on our website. Last year, we circulated 8,456 legal education brochures, 3,295 self-help items, and our online FAQs were accessed 5,478 times.

IMPACT CASES

LFC, LAS, LABB v. OCFS, Supreme Court, Rensselaer County, EF2022-271346

This dispute involves an Article 78 proceeding. The plaintiffs successfully established standing in the Appellate Division, although the Rensselaer County Supreme Court denied the substantive relief sought. An appeal is currently pending in the Appellate Division, Third Department, with a brief due by June 11, 2024. OCFS has agreed to pause the implementation of the regulations during the appeal process. The outcome of this case could impact the operation of a potential shadow foster care system, affecting hundreds, if not thousands, of children in New York State annually.

TECHNOLOGY

We upgraded our communication systems by replacing an outdated on-premises phone system with a cloud-based VoIP system. This enables staff to use both computer and mobile apps for seamless voice and text communication with clients. Our wireless network was enhanced to provide a stronger, more consistent signal, allowing staff to use their laptops in client interview rooms and conference rooms. We also replaced aging servers and increased network storage capacity to ensure future-proof, secure connectivity. Laptops were upgraded with touchscreen functionality, improving interaction with our case management system and streamlining intake processes.

Additionally, we installed a kiosk computer in our lobby and introduced portable kiosk laptops for remote intakes, extending our reach to underserved communities. Our printing capabilities were enhanced with upgraded copiers/printers that now include color printing, improving the quality of materials for clients and the public. We expanded our online intake system to include Arabic, Myanmar, and Spanish, broadening access across Buffalo's diverse neighborhoods. Lastly, more mobile hotspots were provided to staff, ensuring reliable access to our network and case management system from remote sites and courtrooms.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

Using part of the 2023 Technology Grant, we retained the services of a company to redesign our website. This is a critical improvement as our website provides four important main purposes. Our website overhaul is a comprehensive redesign aimed at making information more accessible to the public and better presenting our mission. The planning and design phases are in progress, with a full launch expected by September 2024.

A portion of the grant was allocated to enhance our online intake portal by adding Spanish, Myanmar, and Arabic language options, with the grant covering the related IT and translation expenses. We also purchased Microsoft 365 Business Premium licenses, which will allow us to better manage our software Microsoft Software Suite, including the ability to send encrypted email, and new licenses for the fire wall allowing us to better track traffic over our network, giving us better cyber risk detection capabilities and making our network more secure. The remainder of the grant was invested in internal staff support through the purchase of time keeping accessories for our new Human Resource Management System.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

We hosted 62 volunteers: 1 pro bono attorney; 42 law students; and 18 college, paralegal, or high school students. Volunteers contributed 3,460.83 hours to casework and 1,501.31 hours to outreach and office assignments.

A pro bono attorney handled the appeal filed by an ex-spouse on a divorce case in which we represented the wife. At the trial level, the trial court imputed \$148,729 annual income to the spouse and awarded our client \$2,300.58 per month in maintenance for life, \$68,829 in back child support, ongoing child support of \$530.90 per week, \$600,000.00 held in a bank account, and any other identifiable asset, and further directed the spouse to pay all debts of the marriage including \$12,000 of credit card debt in our client's name. The trial court also issued a no-contact order of protection. The decision was appealed in full, and due to competent legal representation provided by our pro bono attorney, we won the appeal and the awards were all affirmed. The outcome of this litigation changed our client's life forever. This case has become one of the leading 4th Department cases regarding domestic violence, income imputation, and equitable distribution in a divorce.

We offer year-round internship opportunities, recruiting law school interns at job fairs and partnering with schools for other student internships. Law Students obtain practice orders and assist with cases under the supervision of unit managers, and other students assist with outreach and office assignments. We developed a new program this year, the goal of which is to allow our interns to experience as much of the law as they can while they are interning with us.

1attorney volunteered **125** hours**42**law students volunteered **3,336** hours**18**other volunteers volunteered **1,501** hours

According to a schedule, all interns will have the opportunity to go with our attorneys to observe cases in all courts that we practice, both civil and criminal, including the 4th Department Appellate Division.

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

WNY Foreclosure Prevention Project: Central intake among three legal providers, with housing counseling by certified agencies, providing foreclosure defense to homeowners. Collaborators include Center for Elder Law and Justice, Western New York Law Center, Belmont Housing Resources, Buffalo Urban League, Westside Neighborhood Housing Services, and Parachute Credit Counseling, Inc.

WNY Eviction Prevention Project: Central intake among five legal providers focusing on eviction defense in rural Erie, Niagara, Genesee, Wyoming, and Orleans Counties. Partners include Neighborhood Legal Services, Inc., Volunteer Lawyers Project, Center for Elder Law and Justice, Western New York Law Center, UB School of Law and 211 WNY.

School Discipline Project: Collaborative effort with ACLU of New York, CoNECT, Community Action Organization of WNY, Western New York Law Center, and University of Buffalo Law School, providing assistance with school discipline issues in Buffalo.

Reentry Project: Focuses on employment, financial well-being, family reunification, and barriers for individuals with criminal records. Involves NYS Department of Labor, NYSDMV, US Attorney's Office, Federal Public Defenders, and others.

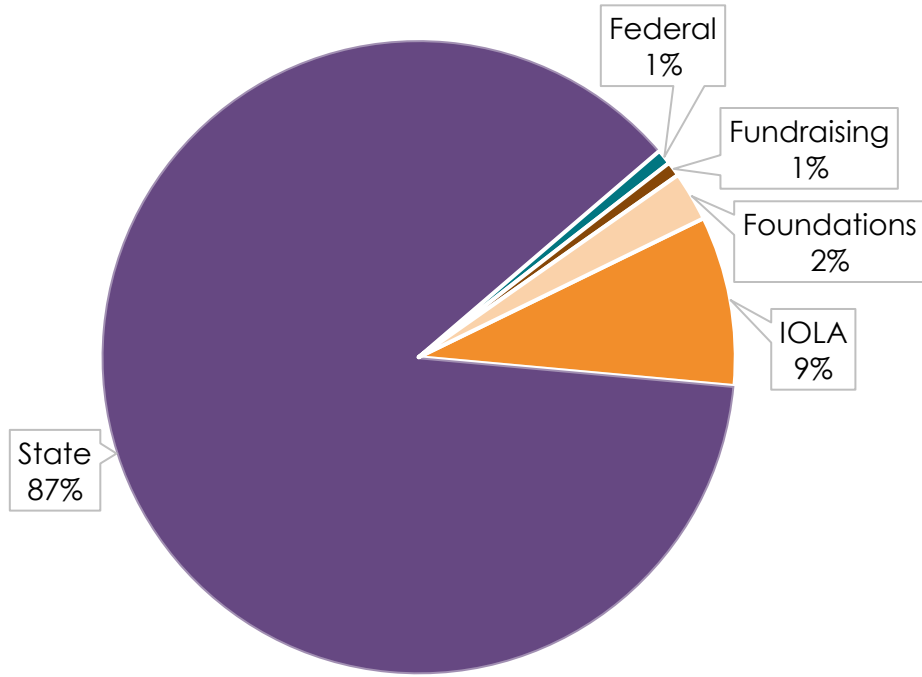
Education Law Program: Extensive network of partners focused on diverse educational and legal challenges, including Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo, NY Civil Liberties Union, Buffalo Public Schools, and many more.

Veterans and Military Families Project: Works with organizations like Veteran's One-Stop Center, WNY Heroes, and Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court to support veterans and their families.

Housing Unit: Partners with local organizations like the City of Buffalo, Neighborhood Legal Services, Center for Elder Law and Justice, and Belmont to address housing issues.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 6,970,901.91



IOLA Funding	\$ 602,181.58
State Funding	\$ 6,059,136.07
Federal Funding	\$ 53,783.21
Foundations	\$ 175,351.11
Fundraising	\$ 52,266.09
Other Funding	\$ 28,183.85